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WINGS OVER WITCHEND

Malcolm Saville



A Lone Pine Adventure

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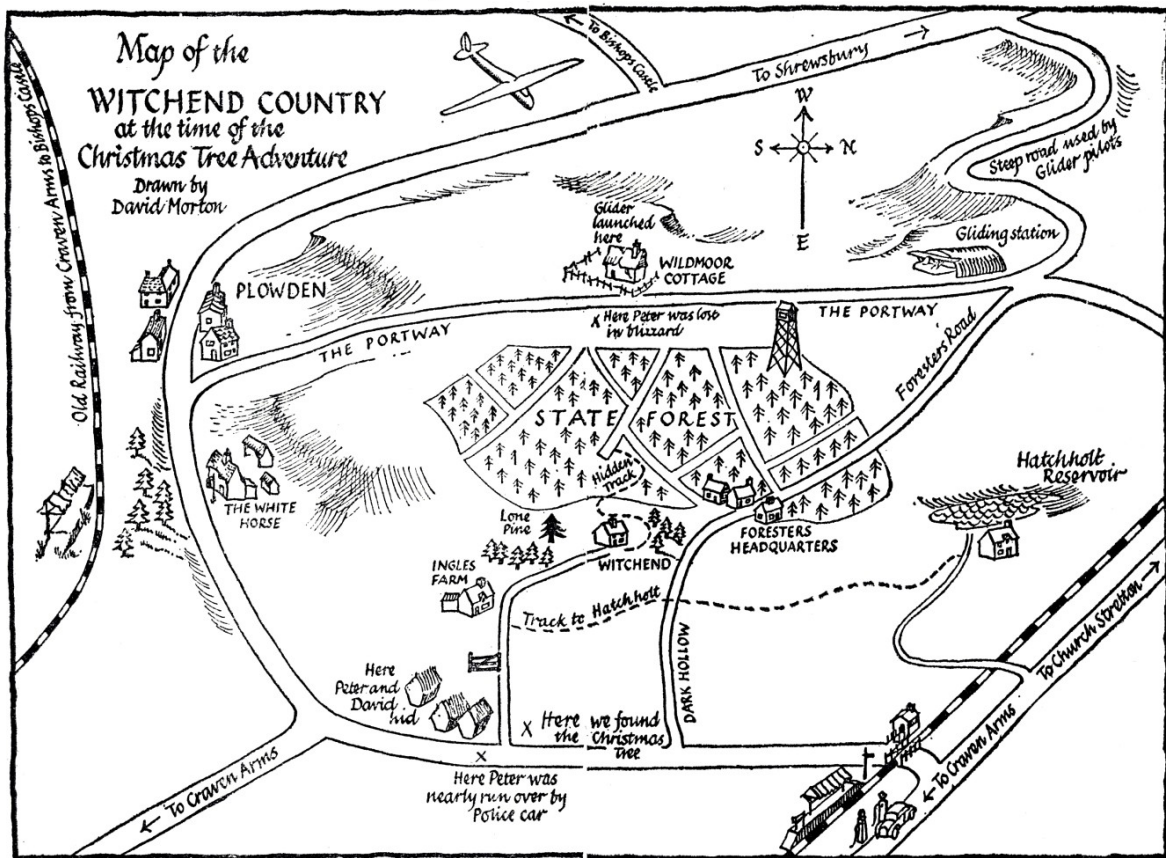
Wings Over Witchend

Malcolm Saville

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Wild and Mysterious Country

Those who have read my other "Lone Pine" stories will remember that the scene of most of them is set in the Shropshire hill country round about the Long Mynd and the Stiperstones. I know that many of my readers have explored, as I have done, this wild and mysterious country so rich in folklore and legend.

But because there really is a gliding club on the top of the Long Mynd and a State Forest too, I must be careful to explain what is real in this story and what is imaginary.

The Long Mynd is real enough of course, but you will not find a house called Witchend (although I know an old house very like it) neither will you find Peter's Hatchholt. There is no village called Onnybrook nor is there any inn, like *The White Horse*. If you are clever, you will be able to find traces of an old railway track which once linked Craven Arms to Bishop's Castle. A large-scale map will show you the roads round the Long Mynd and also the ancient track called the Portway which ran along the summit of this strangely shaped mountain long before the Romans came. You can walk from Church Stretton along this old road to the gliding club.

The half-ruined cottage in which the twins were imprisoned does not exist, and so far as I know there is no watch tower in this forest. It would, I am sure, be difficult and dangerous to sail a glider over the Mynd at night, but the pilot in this story was certainly reckless and courageous enough to try in the moonlight, as you can read for yourself.

So please remember that the people in this book are imaginary, and that no reference is intended to any member of any gliding club or to any of the grand people who look after our new forests.

M. S.

The Lone Pine Club

ALTHOUGH this story is complete in itself, it is about some of the members of the Lone Pine Club who are featured in the other books in this series. You will probably enjoy "Wings Over Witchend" more if you know something about them before you begin.

The Lone Pine Club was started by some boys and girls at a lonely old house called Witchend in the heart of the Shropshire hills.

The rules of the Lone Pine Club are still kept hidden under the solitary pine tree in their first secret camp. They are very simple and are set out in full in "Mystery at Witchend" which is the first story about the Lone Piners. The most important rule is really the oath which each member signed in his or her own blood - *Every member of the Lone Pine Club signed below swears to keep the rules and to be true to each other whatever happens always.*

The Lone Piners seem to have the happy knack of finding adventures, but as they live many miles apart and, except for Tom Ingles, who works on his uncle's Shropshire farm, go to different schools, they are only able to meet in the holidays.

Witchend itself, only about half a mile up the lane from Ingles' farm, belongs to the Mortons who live near London, but use their Shropshire home in the holidays whenever they can. The original headquarters of the club is still the old camp, with its sentinel pine tree, on the slope of the hill above the house, but other camps have been established as necessity arose - one in the barn at a lonely farmhouse called Seven Gates, near the rugged hill range named the Stiperstones, and another at the ruined castle of Clun, some miles to the south near the Welsh border.

The Lone Piners' secret signal to each other is a whistled imitation of the peewit's plaintive call.

The Members

DAVID MORTON aged sixteen was selected captain of the club when it was first founded. He goes to a boarding school and his home is on the outskirts of London. He is a good leader but steady rather than impetuous and never loses his head in a crisis. Not particularly brainy but above the average at school work and games, and never really happier than when he is in the country and at Witchend in particular.

RICHARD ("DICKIE") MORTON AND MARY MORTON. These two are ten-year-old twins, and although they have recently been sent to separate boarding schools they are inseparable at other times. They are astonishingly alike in looks and speech and sometimes in thought. Mary, the elder by an hour, is the more level-headed and really the stronger and more sensible of the two. They have an irritating trick of pretending to be younger than they are and when in action they madden most grown-ups. They have a knack of getting their own way, but when they are together they will tackle anything to justify themselves to the other members of the club who recognize their outstanding qualities of courage and loyalty.

PETRONELLA ("PETER") STERLING is just sixteen and really the founder of the club because she has lived all her life in the Shropshire hills. She has no mother, goes to a boarding school in Shrewsbury, and in the holidays lives with her old father who is in charge of a reservoir called Hatchholt, not very far from Witchend. She is not very keen on school - not because she is lazy or stupid, but because she is independent and not afraid of her own company and happiest when roaming her beloved Shropshire highlands on her Welsh pony, Sally. She loves everything in the open air and knows the stars better than most of you know a map of your own county and can swim faster than most boys of her age.

Perhaps because she likes to go her own way she still wears her fair hair in two plaits. Her eyes are blue and her skin always clear and brown. She looks nice in anything, but most comfortable in jodhpurs and a blue shirt. Peter has never been afraid of solitude and does not make friends easily, but her life was changed when the Mortons came to Witchend for then she realized how lonely she had been. She is the Vice-Captain of the club and David is her special friend.

TOM INGLES is a sixteen-year-old Londoner who now lives and works on his uncle's farm near Witchend. There is no nonsense about Tom, who has a quick wit and even quicker tongue and is liked by everyone who meets him. Although, as he sometimes points out, he has to work for his living and pretends that the club is "only fit for kids", he is really very proud of his membership. The twins often annoy him, but he has a great respect for David and Peter and a particular liking for JENNY HARMAN, who is Shropshire born and lives in the lonely village of Barton Beach not far from the Stiperstones and Seven Gates. She is fifteen, red-headed and small for her age. Her father keeps the local general store and post office and she does not get on very well with her stepmother. Peter first met her when she was lonely and unhappy and badly needed a friend, and suggested that she should be admitted to membership. All the others tease Jenny, but anybody can say anything so long as Tom will stand by her. And he always does.

Finally, there is MACBETH, the Scottie dog, so named by Mr. Morton because as a puppy he "murdered sleep". He thinks that the club belongs to him. He loves all the members but specially Mary, who has nearly wrecked many an adventure because she will carry him when his short legs tire.

1. Witchend Again

When the long Birkenhead train ran into Birmingham, three women got out of the non-smoking compartment in which the Morton twins were travelling but two more got in. Richard and Mary, sitting primly opposite each other in corner seats, glanced meaningly at the newcomers. They would have preferred to travel by themselves, although the old lady in the far corner didn't really count because she had been asleep since Banbury; but these two looked disapprovingly at the little shaggy Scottie dog, sitting with his head on one side on the seat next to Mary.

"Kindly take that dog off the seat," the thinner of the newcomers snapped. "He's no right to be there and it isn't healthy."

"Of course he's healthy," Mary said indignantly. "And he's got a ticket just like us, and the guard who is very nice said he would be all right if we looked after him and he isn't doing any harm-----"

"*And* he's quite clean," her twin chimed in. "And please don't look at Mackie as if you didn't like him 'cos he hates that and he's rather naughty when people make him hate them."

The thin woman, having put her luggage on the rack, turned and stared at the little boy, who grinned at her cheerfully. Then she stared at Mary and blinked.

"Bless my soul," she said wonderingly to her companion. "Just look at 'em. They're twins. As like as two peas in a pod."

The twins were well used to this sort of comment and were prepared to be friendly to anybody who wasn't silly and unreasonable about Macbeth. So Mary smiled and then scooped the little dog on to her lap.

"Acksherley," she said, "my twin is quite right. Mackie is very, very good when he likes people but very, very bad when people don't like him... I'll let him look out of the window now and you'll see that he'll be good."

"We ought to tell you," Richard added, "that we've got awful coughs. We've had whoopers and we don't think anybody ever had them as badly as we did. We're quite disinfected now, if you know what I mean, but our mother says that we can't help it and we don't mind 'cos they wouldn't let us go back to school, and as it's only ten days to Christmas we're starting our special holiday early."

Then the old lady in the corner snored loudly, woke herself up and asked where they were.

"We're changing at Shrewsbury, too," Mary said kindly. "Do you remember that we promised to help you? Our friend Peter is going to meet us there 'cos she's broken up to-day, so we'll all be able to help you... What are you doing now, you silly dog?"

Macbeth had his front paws on the window ledge and was pressing his quivering damp nose on the glass until the steamy surface of the pane was patterned with little peepholes. Dickie wiped his window with his sleeve and peered out. The light of the short December day was waning. Dingy houses, streets and factories in which the yellow lights were beginning to go up were all that he could see, but he knew almost every mile of the line from Paddington to Shrewsbury because they had made the journey many times. Wolverhampton next and then it wouldn't be long before they caught a glimpse of the conical-shaped mountain called the Wrekin rising out of the Shropshire plain by Wellington, and then he knew that it wouldn't be long before Shrewsbury.

Like Mackie, Richard pressed his nose against the cool glass and recognized the outskirts of Wolverhampton. Then he realized that the thin woman was offering him a chocolate.

"You won't say 'No', I'm sure. Take two and welcome for they'll help to pass the time. P'raps the little dog would like one too?"

Mary received this offer coldly.

"No, thank you. Acksherley, we're very strict with his diet and we don't think sweets are good for him. When we get to Shrewsbury and meet our

friend we shall have some time to wait for our other train and then we shall take him into the refreshment place and give him a drink. But thank you all the same. Mackie is much obliged."

The old lady in the corner was nodding again but the other two still gazed at the twins in astonishment. They were certainly so alike that if Mary's hair had been cut as short as her brother's it would have been difficult to tell them apart. They were both wearing high necked yellow jerseys and navy blue shorts.

"So you're twins and you've had whooping cough and you're going to spend the Christmas holidays in Shropshire and you've been there before. I should think you're very lucky children," said the plumper of the two women speaking for the first time.

"Oh yes, we are," Mary agreed, and glanced at her twin. He had no need to answer because she knew at once that he agreed that they should pass the time by telling their travelling companions something about themselves. "Acksherley," she went on, "Our father has an old house called Witchend not far from Onnybrook, and we always go there whenever we can although we have to live near London. It's very, very old and lonely and that's why we take Mackie to guard us from the wild beasts that roam those forests and over the mountain... Do any of you know that mountain? It's called the Long Mynd."

"I've heard tell of it," the thin woman said doubtfully, "but I've never been down that way... But you two mites can't go all that way by yourselves and stay in a lonely house like that Witchend on your own. When's your mother coming to look after you?"

"Don't you worry 'bout that," Dickie broke in cheerfully. "Our mother is coming in the car with Dad and our brother David when he's broken up. Quite soon they're coming. They'll send us a secret message or a dispatch or something in a code just to let us know they're on the way. An' they'll bring supplies for Christmas, too - we hope."

"But you can't sleep by yourselves in a lonely old house! Tisn't right to send you all this way."

"Oh, yes, it is," Mary said indignantly. "It's quite right. Our friend Peter lives quite near Witchend and she has a pony. She's meeting us at Shrewsbury, and when we get to Witchend our great friend Agnes will be there to look after us. When we first saw her we thought she was a witch. But she isn't. She's super really, although she always looks rather miserable and sings lots of sad hymns. She's a widow you see, and her name's Mrs. Braid, and she pretends sometimes that she's very, very cross with us, but we know she isn't, if you know what I mean."

The thin woman, who by now seemed to be hypnotized by them, nodded. She knew very well what Mary meant, and had no difficulty in imagining how Mrs. Braid would try very hard to be angry with this pair and how difficult she would find it to be so for long.

"Acksherley," Dickie broke in, "Agnes is wonderful, and she's very, very kind to us 'cos she's a very good cook... Oh, boy," he added as he rolled his eyes, "I'm telling you she's a good cook."

Then the old lady in the corner woke again and rubbed the window pane in fear that she had overslept Shrewsbury.

"Oh dear! Oh dear!" she wailed. "It's snowing. I hate snow. We don't want snow at this time of year."

"Jiminy Cricket!" Richard shouted excitedly as he rubbed his window.

"This is terrific! Now we'll have to fight the wolves in the snow and maybe we'll never get there at all, and they'll have to send out dogs for us. Maybe it will be a howling blizzard and we'll have sledges?"

"But we're there!" Mary squeaked. "This is Shrewsbury. Hurry up, twin."

Mackie shook himself and tried to keep out of their way as they scrambled into their duffle coats and pulled down their rucksacks. Then, as the train rounded the big curve and rattled over the points, Dickie helped the nervous lady to pull her suit-case from under the seat.

"Happy Christmas, everyone," Mary laughed as she clipped a tartan lead to Macbeth's collar. "Come and see us if you can get through the snow drifts."

Thank you for the chocolate, 'cos it was most sustainin'... Good-bye!"

The train stopped. A man opened the door for them and the cold air stung their cheeks. The platform was crowded. Macbeth hated stations because hurrying people got in his way and trod on him, so he sat down miserably between the two rucksacks which Dickie dumped on the platform.

"Peter didn't say *where* she was going to meet us, did she, twin? She jolly well ought to be here, else we may be sort of abandoned," he said. "I s'pose we shall just have to struggle to Witchend by ourselves."

"Don't be silly, Dickie. She'll come. There's half an hour before our train goes, anyway. Let's just sit on our luggage an' wait for her."

Dickie yawned. He was excited and felt rather empty inside, and he never really liked waiting for anything. At the end of the platform the signal lights turned green, the guard blew his whistle and flashed his lamp and the long train slid slowly out into the darkness on its way to Chester and Birkenhead.

"There she is!" Mary shouted. "Or *is* it Peter, Dickie? She's got a hat on... Yes, it is. She's waving," and she ran up the platform towards a slim schoolgirl who was hurrying to meet them.

Peter didn't look much like the Peter they knew. She was wearing a belted blue overcoat and a blue felt hat with a band round it and black stockings and black shoes.

But her smile was the same as she hugged Mary and bent to make a fuss of Macbeth, who was trying to strangle himself in his excitement at greeting her. Peter was an old friend.

"Hullo, twins," she gasped. "Isn't this terrific? Isn't it marvellous? Wasn't it lucky that I broke up to-day? How are your coughs? It doesn't matter about me because I've had it, but you both *look* all right. Are you?"

"It's most peculiar," Mary explained as she picked up Mackie so that he could lick Peter's nose. "I had the disease first at my school and then Dickie

had it a week later at his and the doctor says it's nothing to do with us being twins, but we think it is 'cos we do have things together."

"Then, 'cos we'd both got it," Dickie went on, "they said we'd better have it at home together, and Daddy had to come and fetch us - one at a time, of course - and Mother says it wasn't at all a good idea."

"I can well believe that," Peter laughed. "Are you hungry, Dickie? How's everybody else?"

"Our parents are very well, thank you, and I expect you know how David is 'cos he writes to you but not to us," Mary said wickedly. "And we are hungry, thank you."

"Good. So am I. Let's go into the refreshment place and have something. It's snowing hard, so we're going to have a marvellous holiday. You've never seen the Mynd covered with snow, have you?"

The twins created plenty of interest in the crowded refreshment-room. Luckily the woman behind the counter liked Macbeth and gave him a saucer of milk and half a sandwich, while the others found a table in the corner.

Peter took off her hat and flicked back her plaits.

"Isn't this school uniform ghastly," she said. "I'm longing to get out of it and I'm longing to get home. The idea is that old John will take us all up to Witchend in his car from Onnybrook and then take me back to Hatchholt. You remember that the track doesn't go all the way up our valley, but I can manage in the dark. I promised to telephone Daddy from Onnybrook, anyway, just to let him know we've all arrived and I expect he'll walk down with a torch to meet me and help with my case."

"What about this snow?" Dickie said with his mouth full of bun. "S'pose it's so thick that you have to struggle through drifts and get lost so that they have to send out dogs for you. Big dogs, I mean. Not Mackie's sort."

"If it's as bad as that, I'll have to spend the night with you at Witchend - or at Ingles' farm," Peter laughed. "Daddy will tell us what it's like on the top of the mountain when we telephone. Does Tom know you're coming?"

"Oh, yes. Mummy telephoned Mr. Ingles and told him and he shouted so loud that we heard him in the next room. He said Tom is looking forward to seeing us, but we don't believe him, 'cos Tom doesn't like us."

"Don't be silly, Mary," Peter said. "Of course he likes you when you're not cheeky. Tom never writes to any of us - not even Jenny - but I bet he's glad you're coming for Christmas... Now we'll go and get a carriage to ourselves."

So they rescued Mackie from behind the counter, wished his new friend a happy Christmas and went out into the cold again. Peter collected her luggage from the cloakroom and then they hurried along to the familiar platform, where a shorter train was waiting. The guard, who was leaning against the door of his van blowing on his hands, looked up and smiled.

The air was thick with whirling snowflakes, through which the signal lights glowed like green and red eyes, and only the parallel lines of the tracks were black in a white world.

Peter looked serious. "It will be thick at home, twins. I hope John will be able to get the car up the lane; but the moon should be up soon and then it won't be so bad if the snow isn't drifting."

"We shall want sledges," Dickie said. "It's all wrong that Witchend isn't on the telephone, but we'll ask Mr. Ingles if we can telephone Dad from the farm and ask him to bring sledges. Maybe we can build a snow hut at the camp, too, Peter? We've never done that before."

Peter agreed that this was a good idea, but she was still looking anxious when they got into their compartment.

"We'd better cough hacking coughs if anybody tries to come in here, twin," Mary suggested. "This is my favourite journey, and it's more fun without strangers."

Dickie tried a practice cough and Macbeth barked in sympathy, while Peter hoped that nobody would have the temerity to come in. Nobody did, and soon they had started on the next stage of what was to prove a very exciting journey. As the train crawled out of the station Dickie opened the window and leaned out.

'It's still snowing," he called over his shoulder. "Will we really be able to get to Witchend without sledges, Peter? Do you think poor Agnes is utterly cut off?"

Mary pulled him back to the seat and made him close the window.

"Do you remember Bill Ward the sailor who told us all about the hills the very first time we came to Witchend?" she said as she hugged Macbeth. "All the things he told us about the Mynd and the Stiperstones were true, weren't they? Let's rub the windows clean and watch for the places we know."

Although it was dark they knew almost every yard of the line as one does know a railway journey that takes you to and from a place which means much to you. The yellow glow from the carriage windows tinted the snow at the side of the track and the sparks from the engine mingled with the softly falling snowflakes. They stopped at Condoover and Leebotwood, where oil-lamps cast a fitful gleam on the snow-covered platforms, and then they crowded to the left-hand side of the compartment to see the first of the Stretton hills.

They opened the window as the train ran into Church Stretton, and there at last was their beloved Long Mynd towering in its smooth strength above the little town. Peter knew it in all its moods, but the twins had never seen its sleek sides covered in snow before, and Dickie said what they were all thinking.

"I wouldn't like to be up on the top, or even going up one of the valleys. You couldn't see any paths, could you?"

"It's all right once you're on the top," Peter said. "I've been up with Sally in the snow, but not at night. The trouble is the bogs, but she seems to know

where they are even though they're under the snow. But you know how wonderful she is. I'm longing to see her."

Their friend the guard flashed his lantern green and the train started. Now the steep slopes of the Mynd came down almost to the line, and as the moon was not yet high enough in the sky to soften their outline, the mountain looked almost sinister.

"Get your things together, twins," Peter said as she opened her bag and stuffed her school hat in it. "We're nearly there."

The train slowed down. High on their left they saw the lighted windows of the signal-box. Over the level crossing and then a flickering oil-lamp showed them - as if they didn't know - that the name of the station was Onnybrook.

They jumped out into six inches of snow with their luggage round them and waved to the guard as he swung on to the step of his van and called "Good night." Then Dickie sniffed the cold air and said, "Super! I think this is the most beautiful station in the whole world... Now let's find old John and whiz up the hill and down the lane and past Ingles, and I'll open the Witchend gate if it's closed and Agnes will be waiting for us and-----"

"And she'll pretend to be grumpy," Mary interrupted. "An' she'll say she hasn't had time to get a meal because she ought to be with her sister in Birmingham or somewhere an' all the time there'll be the most wonderful smell of cooking an'-----"

"And if we don't hurry the meal will be cold," Peter laughed. "Come on. I'll telephone Daddy from the call-box and see how much snow there is up Hatchholt, because John is going to take me as far as he can after you're safe and snug at Witchend... Where's George, I wonder? There doesn't seem to be anyone about."

George was the old porter who knew them all, but except for the shadow of the man in the signal-box beyond the level crossing gates there was nobody in sight. They walked to the end of the platform, dragging Macbeth, who

seemed to want to roll in the snow, and a strange young porter opened the door of the tiny booking office and glared at them.

"Where's George?" Dickie asked as he handed in his tickets. "We know George."

"Well, he's sick," the youth growled. "I'm his relief, and I'll be glad to get out of this dead-and-alive hole," and he took the tickets and slammed the door.

They looked at each other in horror. Shropshire people didn't speak or behave like that! Everybody was friendly and ought to be glad to see them back again.

"He must have been sent from miles away," Peter said indignantly. "I've never seen him before, and I hope George isn't really ill. We'll have to go and see how he is one day... Come on, one of you can come in the box with me while I telephone."

They went out of the little wicket-gate. The snow on the road was untouched. No footsteps. No wheel tracks. Nothing could have come this way for an hour. Everything was very quiet as their breath puffed like smoke into the keen and frosty air. Under the trees it was dark, but behind them was the lighted signal-box, and only fifty yards away was the telephone-box on the corner of the main road from Stretton to Ludlow and the garage where the car would be waiting for them.

But Peter looked worried. It was freezing hard and the snow, where it had drifted, was deep. And it was odd that nobody was about. Almost as if she could read her thoughts, Mary broke a long silence.

"It's most peculiar, but the snow has made everything different. Almost like a dream. It can't be more than seven o'clock, but it's like a story with a spell in it."

"You're soppy," her brother said. "I'm cold and I want my supper. Let's get going."

They dumped their luggage outside the telephone-box and crowded into it with Peter while she spoke to her father.

"Hullo, Daddy. It's me. How are you?... Good... I'm at Onnybrook with the twins, and we're just going up to Witchend with old John, but there's a lot of snow on the road. What's it like with you?... No, darling. The snow! Is it thick in Hatchholt, and shall I be able to get up to-night?"

Faintly the twins heard the tinkle of Mr. Sterling's voice from the receiver. They knew how the old man hated the telephone, but he had a lot to say now.

"All right, Daddy," Peter went on. "I'll stay at Witchend if Agnes will have me and ring you up from Ingles in the morning. I'm sure I'll be able to come home in the light... The twins are fine and send their love... See you soon... Goodbye! "

It was snowing again when they came out of the telephone-box and Mary said, "That's lovely, Peter. You come and stay the night with us, but let's go quickly now 'cos I'm cold. I don't think I like this snow. There's no moon now either."

So the twins picked up their rucksacks and they trudged together through the snow down to the main road and old John's garage on the corner. There was a welcome light in the little office, but when Peter opened the door there was nobody there and the car which John used as a taxi was not in sight either.

"I don't like this," Dickie said suddenly. "Everything is different and much too quiet. Nobody seems to want us."

"Don't be silly," Peter snapped. "I expect John is in the house trying to keep warm. Ring the bell and he'll come."

But he didn't. They rang again and then his wife appeared, looking very worried.

"So 'tis you, Peter. And the twins, too. I've got bad news for you, I fear. John's had an accident in the car, and thank God he's not hurt bad, but the car skidded in Craven Arms and hit a lamp-post. John has gone along to doctor, but he telephoned to say he'd be back as soon as he could get a lift. I'm sorry, my dears, but there's no car for you, and I can't do anything about it... I'm real upset, but there it is," and before any of them could say how sorry they were or ask what they could do, she went in again and shut the door.

In the silence that followed, Dickie gulped and coughed. His whooping cough had been worse than Mary's and he had had a very long day. Mary felt for his hand sympathetically as Peter said, "Well! That's not very helpful, is it? I'm sorry for old John, but don't worry, twins. We'll soon get you home. There's sure to be a car or a lorry or something going up the hill soon because it isn't really late... We'll stand on the corner and ask for a lift."

"Couldn't we telephone Mr. Ingles?" Mary suggested sensibly. "He loves us very much, and he'd hate to think that we're starving here in the snow. He's got what he calls a Land Rover *and* a blue tractor, and he'd come and fetch us."

She had nearly finished speaking when a huge lorry with canvas sides hauling a trailer pulled up outside the garage and a man jumped out of the driving cabin. He was wearing a short leather coat, heavy driving gloves, breeches and leggings and a soft felt hat, the brim of which was pulled down over his eyes. As he lit a cigarette, looked at their luggage and at Macbeth shivering in the snow, he said in quite a pleasant voice:

"You kids know your way about round here? I want an inn called the *White Horse* - near a place called Plowden, I'm told."

Peter, who knew nearly everyone in the district, was sure that he was a stranger and was puzzled about him. She had noticed the word "Removals" on the side of the van which looked rather like an old army lorry, but he would have to go up the hill, and here was their chance of a lift.

"We all live near here and we're going to a place called Witchend, which is about a mile from the road almost on the Long Mynd. Will you please give us a lift to our turning? It's on your way because the *White Horse* is about two miles farther on. You can't miss it if you go straight up this road and bear right when you come to the Craven Arms turning, but we'll show you the way."

The man looked doubtful. "You say this Witchend place is on the Long Mynd? Is it marked on a one-inch map?"

This was such an unexpected question that they all looked at him in surprise until Peter laughed nervously.

"As a matter of fact it is, because it's in a very lonely place. Ingles farm is the nearest house, and that's half a mile away. But why do you ask? Have you heard of it?"

"Not me, miss. I was looking at a map trying to find my way to the *White Horse*, and thinking there's a lot of queer names to places round these parts, that's all. Hop in the front and give me your luggage. I'll take you up to your turning, anyway."

Courteously he picked up Peter's heavy case, but when Dickie lifted his rucksack he said quite sharply: "Put it down, son, and all three get in. I'll stow the luggage away, but you take the dog with you."

He waited until they had all clambered in to the driving cabin and then disappeared behind the back of the van. It was too dark for the three of them to see each other's faces, and Mary whispered hoarsely, "He's rather peculiar for a furniture man, Petah. Do you think we're going to be kidnapped? I don't think I mind much if we are, so long as they keep us warm... Now you behave yourself, Mackie, and don't upset the gentleman."

The little dog licked her face as the man climbed back into the cabin and slammed the door.

"Have you got something secret in the back there?" Dickie, who was now feeling more cheerful, asked cheekily. "Unless you're quite full up there'd

be more room for us inside, wouldn't there?"

"You can get out and walk if you'd rather, young man, and I don't want any saucy questions from you."

Dickie gulped, but as he was sitting between Peter and Mary, who both nudged him, he decided to say no more.

The man started the engine, and as he let in the clutch the back wheels whizzed round and the van skidded in the snow. Then he set his wipers working to clear the windscreen and tried again. Slowly the van moved forward and Peter said, "There's a level crossing just round the corner. I hope the gates are open for you, and I ought to warn you that it's uphill all the way to our lane, with lots of corners."

The gates were in their favour and there was no sign of life as they crawled over the lines and started the long climb. The stranger was a skilful driver, and although, as Peter had feared, the snow had drifted on some of the corners, they climbed up steadily in low gear, and after a little he talked to them in a friendly way. It wasn't long before the twins were chattering in return and telling him about Witchend and the holidays they had enjoyed there and what a wonderful place it was in the shadow of the mountain.

Although they climbed the hill very slowly, it did not seem long before Peter warned him to look out for the signpost which marked the narrow lane leading to Ingles and Witchend.

"I'd like to see your place," the man said as he stopped the lorry. "But the lane looks too narrow for me, and I'm in a hurry... Stay where you are and I'll get your luggage. Don't get down yet."

They heard him fumbling about in the back of the van, and Dickie tried to find a hole in the canvas behind the seat so that he could see what was inside, but he had no luck, and anyway Peter whispered crossly that he should behave himself. Then the man opened the door and helped them down.

"Two miles to the *White Horse*, you said?" he asked Peter. "What do you know about that place?"

Peter laughed. "Nothing, really. How should I? We've passed it lots of times. It's close up against the hill at the end of the Long Mynd, but it's a lonely place, and you often see milk lorries outside... Good night, and thank you for the lift. Don't forget to bear right at the next turning."

The man smiled unexpectedly.

"Witchend, eh? I've remembered now. Some chap told me that place was empty. How long are you kids staying there? Did you say your parents were coming up soon? Are you three going to be alone there tonight?"

Peter felt uneasy at all these questions, but the man was really pleasant enough, and she could hardly stop Mary when she answered him.

"My father will be very cross if we don't thank you prop'ly for rescuing us to-night," she finished. "An' now, if you'll 'scuse us, we've got a long walk in the snow, but we'll tell Daddy and my brother David all about you when they come. They'll be here very soon."

"Good night to you, then. I wouldn't care to be snow-bound in your Witchend," and he got back into the cab and drove off.

They stood in the middle of the road and watched the red light on the back of the empty trailer dwindling into the distance. The wheels left black lines on the white road, and even as they watched the moon came out again behind the scudding clouds and the snow stopped falling.

"He was a peculiar sort of man," Mary said. "I wonder why he wanted to know such a lot about Witchend?"

"Don't know," her twin answered. "I wish I knew what he'd got inside that van. I tried to find out, but Peter nudged me. Why did you, Peter?"

"I didn't like him much, and although I'm thankful for the lift I'm glad we're rid of him now... Come on, twins.

I'm looking forward to Witchend and supper and Agnes making a fuss of us."

They set off together down the narrow lane with the great bulk of the Long Mynd ahead of them. The hedges were too high for the moon to give them much light and the untrodden snow was at least six inches deep.

They didn't speak much, for they were all tired and hungry and Peter's suitcase was heavy. They had to put it down and rest at every other telephone pole, and when they were within sight of Ingles farm Mary said, "Let's go in and see Mr. and Mrs. Ingles, and then Tom will carry your luggage, Peter. I'm sure they're expecting us."

But Peter thought not. "Once we go in they'll keep us at least half an hour, and as Witchend isn't on the telephone we can't let Agnes know that we're going to be late. She might be very worried about us, twins, and we must go to Witchend as soon as we can. I'm so tired I could cry, but I'm worried about Agnes, and so should you be. Agnes is very good to you."

"We know. We know," Dickie replied rather grumpily. "We like her very much, although she's sometimes very stern with us. Sometimes she just doesn't understand us, does she, Mary?"

"That's right. She doesn't realize how we're growing up, but all the same I'll give her the biggest hug ever when we get there, 'cos I'll be so glad to see her... Listen, Petah, and I'll tell you what it will be like. There'll be a big fire in the range and the curtains will be drawn tight and the oil-lamp will be in the middle of the table. And on the range there'll be things cooking and p'raps milk for the cocoa and a kettle singing ready for tea if that's what we like. And on the table there'll be cornflakes and brown bread and honey and cake and maybe eggs, 'cos Agnes thinks boiled eggs aren't too heavy after a long journey. That's what it will be like, won't it, twin?"

Dickie grunted. 'I've got to rest a sec, Peter. Sorry, but my fingers are dying or something. I should think your case has got lead in it."

He flexed his fingers and blew on them and then grinned at Peter. "Mary's right about Agnes, really. She nearly always looks miserable, but deep

inside her she isn't. I bet she's standing by the fire now waiting for us to come, and I bet she's got on a black dress and a red woolly coat, and when we walk in her mouth will be sort of down at the corners and she'll try not to smile when she's really glad to see us... Come on. Let's get going. I think I'd like toast with my egg."

And spurred on by the thought of the welcome waiting for them they hurried on through the snow. They turned the last corner of the lane, and there, snug under the hillside, was beloved Witchend. Just as Mary had said, there was a welcoming glow behind the window curtains and the smell of wood smoke from the chimney. Up on their left was the slope of the larch wood and under the snow the stream which ran through Witchend's old yard and down the side of the lane tinkled a quiet welcome. Mary ran forward to open the gate and Macbeth barked excitedly and dashed up to the door. Peter whistled the peewit's call and then they ran to the porch.

"We've come, Agnes," Mary shouted as she banged on the door. "We're here again, but we nearly needed a rescue party."

They dumped their rucksacks in the porch and kicked off the snow from their shoes, and then Dickie opened the door, which was never locked.

"Here we are, Agnes," he shouted.

There was no answer. They hurried into the living-room. The table was laid. The kettle was singing on the range and the fire glowed red behind the bars. On the patchwork cushion of the old rocking chair was some knitting, and in the silence of their surprise they heard the clock on the mantelpiece ticking. Their welcome was complete but for the housekeeper.

"Agnes!" Mary shouted with an edge of fear in her voice. "Where are you, Agnes? We've come."

No answer. They looked in the scullery for her and then searched every room upstairs.

"But she *must* be here," Dickie said stubbornly. "She was here, 'cos she's got everything ready for us like we said. I can't believe it, but is she playing a

joke on us?"

"Of course not," Peter whispered. "Of course she was here, but where has she gone when she must have been worried about us? And did you notice, twins, that when we came across the yard there were no footprints in the snow? We were the first to come to the house for hours and nobody can have come out else we should have seen their tracks."

2. Primrose

Dickie and Mary stood beside Peter in the porch. The moon was now shining above the wood and there was enough light for them to see that what she said was true. Their own footsteps and the track made by Macbeth led from the gate to where they were now standing, and they remembered that the snow was untouched, when they arrived a few minutes ago. Whatever had happened to Agnes, she had certainly not come out of the front door.

"But she *must* be near," Mary whispered. "She must be, Peter. It was just like what we said. Our supper is ready and she must have been acksherley waiting for us. Where can she have gone?"

Peter's heart was thumping uncomfortably, but she dared not show the twins that she was afraid. Ever since they had arrived at Onnybrook little things had unexpectedly gone wrong. First they had expected the usual warm welcome from George at the station, only to find a rude young man who seemed to care nothing about his job or them either. And then, although it was still early, Onnybrook was deserted. Old John had failed them and his wife wouldn't or couldn't help them. Then there was the curious driver of the lorry who had given them a lift, and yet didn't want them to see what he was carrying. In some odd way he had seemed interested in Witchend, although he had at first denied knowing anything about it. And now Agnes had disappeared just when they wanted her most.

Suddenly Macbeth cocked his head on one side and whined. "He's heard something," Mary whispered. "Where's Agnes, boy? Find her."

He barked and took a few steps forward while they watched him anxiously. Then he whined and in a flurry of snow dashed round the side of the house.

Peter laughed in relief. "What fools we are, twins. Of course, Agnes went out of the back door, but why couldn't she hear us...? Come on. Let's follow the bloodhound."

Witchend was built at the foot of a narrow valley leading up into the heart of the Long Mynd. A little stream ran down this valley, through the yard and along the side of the lane past Ingles' farm. The western slopes near the house were thick with larches, but the hill on the opposite side was bare except for bracken which crept down nearer to the house each year. The valley soon narrowed and on the eastern side, close to the stream, was another wood with a little-used track leading eventually through a State forest of growing trees up towards the top of the Mynd. On the other side of the stream, under the larch-wood, was a wider but overgrown track leading in the same direction, but which the children never used as it was not the quickest way up to the top of the mountain.

With a twin on each hand Peter ran through the crisp snow round the side of the house into the little yard where the firewood was stored in a ramshackle shed. Macbeth, now barking madly, raced ahead to the little gate in the wire fence which was once supposed to keep the rabbits out of Witchend's vegetable garden.

"Look!" Peter shouted. "There are her footprints in the snow. She came out of the back door and went to the gate. But why should she want to go out?"

"She left the gate open, anyway," Dickie said sensibly. "Let's trail her."

Mackie was now darting along the narrow track fringed with dead bracken and suddenly Mary shouted, "There's a light! Look. Right ahead. Just at the edge of the wood. It's somebody with a torch. It must be Agnes. Let's call her."

They stopped and shouted with all their strength:

"AGNES! Where are you? AGNES! "

Faintly the echoes of their voices came back to them from the hillside, and then they heard her answering call. As they ran forward again a great owl, furious that so much noise should disturb his nocturnal hunting, gave his weird cry as he drifted overhead.

Peter, in spite of the twins' protests, raced ahead, and so was the first to greet Agnes, who was waiting for them at the edge of the little wood with a young woman who seemed to be standing on one leg, with one arm round the housekeeper's shoulders. They were in a pool of moonlight, so it was easy to see that Agnes looked as stern as usual.

"Hullo, Agnes," Peter puffed. "What's happened? I'm sorry we're late, but John's had an accident and we had to get a lift up the hill and walk down the lane with our luggage... Here are the twins, but we were very worried when we couldn't find you... Mackie had more sense than any of us and followed you round to the back of the house."

Agnes nodded and stooped to pat Macbeth, who was jumping up at her.

"I was getting real anxious about you, but better late than never, although it's time this pair of rascals was tucked up in bed... Let me look at you, twins. Maybe you could put your weight on Petronella for a while, miss."

Peter stepped forward and smiled at the stranger, who put her arm round her shoulders and said, "I don't know who you all are, but you're very, very welcome. I've been a fool and got lost, and then, just when I was in sight of this cottage, I tripped over something in the snow and twisted my ankle. Do you all live here?"

She had a pleasant, rather deep voice, and Peter guessed that she couldn't be more than thirty.

"We're all staying at Witchend," she said shortly, "but we'll soon get you indoors. Whatever were you doing alone on the Mynd on a night like this? Excuse me saying so, but you can't know much about our country to take such risks."

"I'll tell you all about it presently," the woman answered, "but I'm most grateful for your help and sorry to have been such a fool."

Meanwhile, Agnes and the twins were reunited and the housekeeper's voice was unexpectedly gruff when she turned round and said, "Lucky for this young woman that I had to go outside for more logs. I heard her calling for

help... Richard and Mary had better run back to the house and make some tea while Petronella and I look after this young woman... Be off with you and get into the warm and take this foolish little dog with you... Now miss. Take that luggage off your back and give it to Petronella who's more used to that sort o' nonsense than I am, and then we'll help you down to the house."

The stranger smiled ruefully and slipped a knapsack from her back and then Peter realized that she was dressed in cord slacks, heavy boots and a leather windcheater over a thick jersey.

"You're very good," she said. "I'm sure the ankle is only twisted but I wouldn't have liked to have struggled to your house alone. I'll try not to be too much of a nuisance."

It took them nearly a quarter of an hour to get her back, but when the track was wide enough for them to walk three abreast she hopped along quite well between Agnes and Peter with an arm on their shoulders.

The twins were watching for them from the scullery window and had the back door open as they crossed the yard.

"We've boiled eggs, Agnes," Mary squeaked. "We've done five 'cos we know all visitors like boiled eggs, and the tea is made too and we've taken off our wet shoes and I've washed my hands but Dickie hasn't... Fancy you rescuing somebody, Agnes... P'raps you ought to tell this lady who we are?"

"She'll know soon enough," Agnes said grimly. "Nobody can be in your company more than sixty seconds and not know what you are! You're a pair of young rascals and you're nothing but a worry to me, and if one of you coughs then you both go off to bed which is where you ought to be this very minute... Now, miss. Into the other room and we'll soon see what's wrong... That's it. Take my knitting off the chair, Peter."

The young woman sat back thankfully in the rocker and closed her eyes while the others stood around and stared at her. Although her face was white and strained with pain she was, in a way, rather nice looking. She was dark, with her hair cut almost as short as that of a man, and Peter guessed

that she would be the sort of woman who was keen on the open air and sport.

Agnes broke the silence as she took off her coat.

"A hot drink is what we all want, and you take your shoes off, Peter, and if your stockings are damp you'll change this very moment. Does your father know where you are else he'll be worried?"

Peter explained. "And if you don't mind, Agnes, may I sleep with Mary tonight and then we'll see what it's like in the morning and I can telephone Daddy from Ingles?"

"Of course you can, my dear, and very welcome, but get out of those wet stockings first, and I'll pour some tea."

And almost before the children realized what had happened Agnes had satisfied herself that the twins were warm and dry and peeled off Peter's stockings and given her a towel to rub her cold feet, poured out cups of tea for all of them and made up the fire.

"Now, miss," she said when they were all feeling warmer. "Off with that boot and let me look at that ankle."

Their visitor had some colour in her cheeks now and was looking round her curiously. The twins were a little surprised that she took no special notice of them, but she seemed to like Peter and smiled her thanks when the girl went down on her knees and unlaced her heavy boot.

"You'd better take it off yourself," Peter suggested. "The ankle is swollen and I may hurt you."

She sat back on her heels and watched the stranger while Agnes, gaunt and thin in her black dress and red cardigan, stood by the fire.

"I wish you'd tell us your name and what you were doing on the Long Mynd at this time of night," Peter said. "It's silly not to call each other by our names. The twins are Richard and Mary Morton and their father owns

this house, although they live near London. Agnes is Mrs. Braid who looks after them all when they come here to stay, and I'm their friend Petronella Sterling, and I live at Hatchholt at the top of one of the valleys near here."

The woman looked at her keenly and Peter noticed that her eyes were wide and grey with tiny wrinkles at the corners. She wore no lipstick and her ringless hands, as she eased off the heavy boot, were broad and rather masculine. Then she smiled as she put down the boot and pulled off a thick, yellow sock.

"So you live on the Long Mynd, Petronella? I didn't realize anyone did that and I was surprised to see the welcome lights of this house just now. I'll tell you all about myself in a minute but my name is Primrose Wentworth."

Dickie, to their horror, stifled a giggle. None of them had ever known anyone named Primrose and this woman, however pleasant she might be, certainly did not suggest the pale, shy heralds of spring.

"You'd better call me Primrose," she went on as she felt her swollen ankle gingerly and looked up at Agnes. "I'm sure there's not much wrong with this. I can move it now that I'm not putting any weight on it. What do you think, Mrs. Braid?"

Agnes went down on her knees beside Peter and felt the ankle.

"We'll do no harm if we put a cold compress on this. Where were you hoping to get to-night, Miss Wentworth, for you're miles from anywhere here?"

"So I realize. I'm staying in Church Stretton, but I'm keen on walking and wanted to explore the Mynd. I meant to walk the whole length along the Portway and down this end but it all took much longer than I thought. I got lost late this afternoon in the forest, but from somewhere up there I saw the lights of your windows and thought it would be easier to get down to a road this way. It had been snowing hard then for quite a long time and as I'd no torch it was difficult to read the map. Then I lost the track and just when I was within reach of you here I tripped over a root in the snow. At first I thought I'd broken my ankle and I was leaning against a tree trying not to

faint when I saw the light which must have been Mrs. Braid opening the back door. I've been lucky, haven't I?"

"Reckon you have," Agnes said grimly. "Sit here and I'll find a bandage and a bit of old sheeting and you can fetch a bowl o' water, Mary."

Dickie, who had not had much to say since Primrose's arrival, now sat down on the hearth rug and looked at her so solemnly that she found his gaze disconcerting.

"What do you want, Richard?" she said sharply. "Why do you look at me like that?"

"Like what?" he said. "I'm just jolly interested in you and was thinking what a wonderful adventure you must have had in those woods in the dark with the snow falling and you not really knowing where you were... Did you hear the wolves? There's wolves in that forest and that's why we never go out at night."

"Shut up, Dickie!" Peter said sharply. "Don't take any notice of him when he talks like that, Miss Wentworth. He's only putting on an act."

"P'raps Peter has never seen 'em but Mary an' me nearly have and I think you're jolly brave----- But please will you tell us something we'd all like to know? Where did you think you'd be able to stay to-night? Did you see Witchend marked on the map?"

Primrose looked up in surprise as Mary and Agnes came back into the room.

"I seem to remember seeing this house marked on the map, but do any of you know an inn called the *White Horse*? Somebody in Stretton told me about it and said it was near a place called Plowden at the end of the Mynd. I thought I might get a bed there because it's much nearer the mountain than Onnybrook."

"So it is," Peter agreed, and then, remembering the lorry driver who had also been asking for the *White Horse* she added. "All the same, I shouldn't

think you would have liked that place 'cos it doesn't look as if a woman has ever stayed there... Now let's do up your ankle."

While she was bandaging the cold compress in place Agnes said, "You must stay and have some supper with us, miss, and I'm sure Mrs. Morton would wish me to ask you to stay the night here. Tis sure you can't move on that ankle for a while and we couldn't get a car up here in this weather. Stay here and welcome, miss, for there's a bed to spare."

"That's very kind of you. Thank you so much. I'm sure my ankle will be better in the morning for the pain has nearly gone already. I'd like you to tell me all sorts of things about the country around and the Long Mynd in particular. It must be wonderful to live up here, Peter."

Peter nodded. "I go to school in Shrewsbury, but I wouldn't live anywhere else in the world."

"Not another word until you've all had something to eat," Agnes said. "Sit down, twins... There's more tea in the pot and I'll make some cocoa for Peter for I know she likes it, and if your eggs are too cold I'll boil some more."

Ten minutes later Dickie, who was sitting next to Peter, fell asleep with his head on his arm and Mary could hardly keep her eyes open.

"The poor mites," Agnes said. "Tis a shame for us to forget they've been travelling all day from that London. I've put bottles in your beds already so up you go."

Peter helped Dickie from his chair and then found herself alone in the room with Primrose Wentworth.

"Funny kids," the latter said. "How long are they staying here and when do you say their parents are coming?"

"I didn't say, but they'll be here in a day or two - probably at the week-end. And the twins *are* funny and sometimes cheeky but they're grand."

"Oh, I like them too... If you're able to get home to your place in the morning and I can get on my way too, will those two be here alone with Mrs. Braid?"

"Of course they will, but why are you so interested? Agnes has lived at Onnybrook all her life and knows every inch of the country. They'll be all right. Why shouldn't they?"

"I just thought that it was so lonely and that you could easily be cut off in a deep snow, but you said there was a farm near, didn't you?"

"Only half a mile down the lane and Mr. and Mrs. Ingles will always do anything to help anybody, so they've got nothing to worry about here."

"Do you know any of the people working in the State Forest?" Primrose asked. "I came down here through that but didn't see anybody."

"Of course I do. I know Mr. Hardwick, the head forester who lives in a wooden house next the sawmill at the top of the next valley to this. And I know Mr. Gibbs, too, who is the second in command, I believe."

"I'm interested in these new forests," Primrose said. "It's wonderful to think of people spending their lives making trees grow. The forest is not far from here, is it?"

"Not really although there's no proper road up to it. The lane from the road past Ingles stops here... Now I'm going up to say 'Good night' to the twins."

Dickie was already asleep in the room under the eaves which he shared with his brother David, so Peter went into Mary's room where Mackie was lying on the end of her bed.

"Thank you for meeting us to-day, Peter," she said as she snuggled down.

"It's lovely to be here again but I'm so tired and muddled up that I can hardly remember all the exciting things that have happened to us-----

Please don't make a noise when you come up, and p'raps Mackie had better sleep by the fire downstairs 'cos it's too cold for him up here. He'll guard us

just as well downstairs... It'll be lovely waking up and finding you here in the morning."

From downstairs came the murmur of voices as Primrose helped Agnes to clear away. Peter blew out the candle on the dressing-table and drew back the curtains. It was snowing again and the silence of the hills was close round the little house.

Downstairs Agnes was droning out a mournful hymn as she washed up in the scullery while Primrose, with her bandaged foot resting on a cushion, was sitting by the fire smoking a cigarette. She smiled as Peter crossed the room to help Agnes.

"I've been asking Mrs. Braid to tell me some of the old Shropshire folk-tales when she's finished out there," she said. "I'm so interested in your wonderful country and think you're so lucky to be living up here."

Peter nodded. She thought so too, but had never known a stranger to be quite so curious and enthusiastic.

It was nearly nine o'clock by the time they had finished clearing up, and then they turned on the battery radio to hear the news and weather forecast which warned them of snow and frost in the north and midlands. By this time Peter was finding it hard to keep awake, but she did manage to listen again to the story of the Long Mynd parson who was lost in the snow. It was a thrilling story of courage and endurance and she never tired of hearing it.

"There's many legends as they call them about the Long Mynd, miss," Agnes began as she held her wrinkled hands to the fire. "My grandad used to tell us tales that his grandfather told him, but this bit o' snow that gave you some trouble to-night reminds me of the true tale of Parson Carr who was vicar of Woolstanton which is a village this side of the Mynd. Near a hundred years ago this was, and those of us who live round here knows how dangerous the mountain can be for all its harmless looks. As Peter knows better than most there's places round here well-named, Deadman's Lane, Deadman's Hollow and the like. And my grandad told me of tunnels cut

through snowdrifts on these hills to reach folks cut off in some o' the lonely cottages...

"But to get back to Parson Carr. Reckon he must have been a good as well as a brave man for he took on the job of being the parson of a little place called Ratlinghope on t'other side of the Mynd and for eight years he never missed, in fog or snow, crossing the mountain to give Sunday afternoon service at Ratlinghope and I must say I hope those folks appreciated him... The only way up from Woolstanton was to Wildmoor Pool which Peter knows is just about the top o' the Mynd, and then down a track through the heather to Ratlinghope. 'Twas his custom to go horseback with a servant, and one January Sunday after a week o' snow he set off as usual. After half a mile he found the snow too deep for the horses and sent 'em back with the man. It took him, so they say, near three hours to reach Ratlinghope and then the foolish man, in spite of plenty of offers to stay the night, started back. The story says, and 'tis true enough, that he struggled up to Wildmoor in the face of the worst southeast gale ever known in these parts. He had to crawl, for the wind was too strong to walk upright, and then he lost his way in the dark and struggled on towards Lightspout over Stretton way. He lost his hat and gloves. His hair was ice and icicles clung to his eyebrows and whiskers. He fell down ravines into great drifts and knowing he would die if he stopped to rest he struggled on through all that awful night. Day dawned with fog. He was nearly snow blind and his boots burst with the strain but later that day he was found by some children from cottages near the Lightspout. He did not die but 'tis little wonder that he was a changed man after his walk o' twenty-two hours in the wildest part o' the Mynd."

"But didn't anyone go out to look for him?" Primrose asked.

"O' course they did. And all they found was the body of a man who'd been fool enough to go out looking for his hill ponies... But the story o' Parson Carr is true, miss, for it's been printed in a book and they say you can see his boots for yourself in Shrewsbury museum. Maybe Peter has seen them?"

Peter, who was half asleep, jumped in her chair at the question and got up.

"Yes, I have. The story is true and I think we were all lucky to find Witchend tonight... I'm sure we should all be in bed, though."

Primrose got up too.

"Good-night, Mrs. Braid, and thank you for rescuing me and for your care of me. If Peter will help me upstairs with my rucksack I shall manage very well."

Peter lit two candles, helped her up the stairs to the best bedroom and then ran down for the heavy rucksack. When she came back Primrose was at her window looking out over the larch wood.

"It's still snowing, Peter. I hope I'll be able to get on my way in the morning... I suppose that even if there was a short way up from here through the forest to the top of the Mynd it wouldn't be safe for me to try it?"

"Of course it wouldn't! I hope you sleep well. Good night!"

Back in her own room she said her prayers before undressing, and then, just before she blew out the candle, Mary stirred and opened her eyes.

"Hullo, Petah!" she whispered. "I've been dreaming. I've been dreaming we're going to have a wonderful adventure again."

3. The Strange Lorry

When Peter woke next morning it was a moment or two before she realized that she was at Witchend and not in the dormitory at school. She sat up and felt for her wrist-watch under the pillow. Five minutes past eight and a cold morning with snow still drifting past the window.

Then she remembered the happenings of yesterday and wondered about their visitor and whether they were going to be snowbound at Witchend. She wondered whether she could reach Hatchholt this morning. At this thought she jumped out of bed because, if she was to try, the sooner the better before the snow drifts in the valleys made them impassable.

As she slipped on her dressing-gown Mary stirred and turned over. It seemed a pity to wake her, so Peter grabbed her clothes off the chair, picked up her suit-case and crept out on to the tiny landing.

The bathroom which Mr. Morton had installed in the old house was not very much bigger than a cupboard with a bath in it, and Peter decided to go down to the living-room first and see whether Agnes had a cup of tea ready.

There was no sound from the other bedrooms, but from below she could now hear a doleful humming, so she knew that Agnes had started another day. She stopped at the top of the stairs as Macbeth came bounding up in welcome.

"Quiet, Mackie," she laughed as she put down her suitcase and hugged him. "Please don't wake the others yet. Come down with me."

Agnes looked up from the stove and nodded.

"Good morning to you, my dear. You look bonny enough this morning and are just in time for a cup o' tea... Sit down and warm yourself afore you dress for I've some news... Our visitor has left us! "

"No, Agnes! Not our Primrose? But she could barely walk last night and how do you know? Have you looked in her room?"

"No need, my dear. She's written me a letter. Very polite, I must say, but I just don't know what's going on round here. She's gone right enough, but where I wouldn't know... Read it for yourself, dearie. 'Twas propped up against the old clock."

The sheet of paper which Agnes passed over looked as if it was torn from a notebook and the message had been written with a ball-point pen.

"Dear Mrs. Braid," Peter read, "this is to thank you again for all your kindness to me last night. My ankle is almost normal this morning, and as I don't wish to impose myself on your happy household any longer than is essential, I am going to make my way to the main road before the snow gets any worse. Although I have not had any previous experience of snow in these hills, I cannot help remembering the story you told us last night, and as you have young children in your care I would like to suggest that you all might be wise to leave so isolated a house this morning.

"With many thanks again to you and the young people,

Yours sincerely,

Primrose Wentworth"

"Young people, indeed!" Peter snorted, pink in the face with annoyance.

"What a ridiculous letter, Agnes. She must be crazy."

"Mad or not, dearie, I'm inclined to say 'good riddance.' 'Tis nothing to do with me, I reckon, but a letter like that don't seem to me to be the way to behave," and she turned to the teapot on the stove humming the first lines of *Rock of Ages cleft for me*. While she was pouring the tea Peter jumped up and ran over and opened the door. Only a few tiny, sparkling flakes were falling now, and it looked as if soon the sun would shine. The fallen snow was hard and crisp, and from a leak in the gutter over the porch an icicle gleamed like a silver spear. The tracks which they had all made last night had gone, but those of Primrose Wentworth were so clear that Peter noticed that one foot had dragged a little and blurred the impression of her nailed boot.

Mackie dashed joyfully into the snow barking excitedly, so she closed the door and came back into the room.

"Thank you, Agnes," she said as she took her cup. "This is all very odd. She must have hated the sight of us, mustn't she? Did she take anything for breakfast?"

"Not so far as I can see, my dear. Maybe that thing she'd got on her back was filled with rayshuns. How a body can walk around with such a load is beyond me, and she must be in a mortal hurry to get somewhere else."

"Do you think she was scared, Agnes? Really frightened of being cut off here, do you think? And another thing. I s'pose her ankle really was twisted?"

Agnes looked up sharply.

"But o' course it was, dearie. She wasn't play-acting when I found her last night, but it couldn't have been more than a bad wrench, else she wouldn't be such a fool as to go out on it this morning... I've got a feeling she was in a hurry to get somewhere last night, and even more of a hurry to get there this morning... Think no more of her and her nonsense now, dearie, and get yourself dressed down here by the fire, and then we'll get my two precious rascals up and have some breakfast afore we decide what to do."

"I know what I've got to do, Agnes. I've got to get home to Hatchholt as soon as I can. After breakfast I'll go down to Ingles and telephone Daddy from there."

"That's as maybe," Agnes said. "You've to be sure them dratted telephone wires aren't down. It won't be the first time, and if they are Alf Ingles will be shouting and creating. He's the noisiest man I know."

Peter laughed. "Yes, he is, but he's very sweet... I'm going up to wash now, and then I'll get the other two up and their beds made, and if you've got bacon and eggs that would be wonderful."

Agnes snorted. "Giving your orders now, miss? Be off with you," and as Peter ran upstairs she heard the house-keeper droning something which sounded like "*Brief life is here our portion.*"

The twins were remarkably good-tempered when they were wakened and during the supervision of teeth-cleaning Peter told them about Primrose.

"She's crackers," was Dickie's terse comment. "Fancy going off without any breakfast."

"Jew know," Mary added, "I was wondering last night whether she was a witch. A sort of white witch, if you know what I mean. She was nice enough, but peculiar."

And a few minutes later, when she was brushing her hair while Peter made her bed, she turned round and said, "Would you think that Primrose might mean the start of an adventure for us, Petah? I was dreaming last night that we were going to have an adventure. It's a long time since we did, and Dickie an' me are quite ready... I think we'll trail her footsteps down the lane after breakfast. I bet she'll want rescuing again."

Peter laughed. "My adventure is to get home to see Daddy. The sun is going to shine soon, so I'll be all right except for my case, and p'raps Tom would help me with that... Let's all go and see Tom and the Ingles after breakfast."

But Tom came to see them. They were still round the table when they heard his clear but haunting whistle of the peewit's call as he crossed the yard.

Peter ran to the door to greet him as he kicked the snow off his rubber boots in the porch.

"Hullo, Tom. Bet you never expected to see me. I've spent the night here. How are you?"

Tom was short, slight and wiry, with dark hair and a tanned face. He was wearing breeches and what looked like several jerseys under a leather wind-cheater, and an old beret.

"Hullo, Pete," he smiled. "So they've let you out again? Nice to see you. I s'pose the twins are here, too? I've brought up the milk and some eggs."

"Come in, young man, and shut the door *if* you please," Agnes called.

"Morning, Mrs. Braid," Tom said as he came in and pulled his boots off. "Hullo, Mackie. You're getting too fat. Hullo, twins. You're very quiet this morning. Still asleep?"

Mary put down her spoon. Dickie put down his spoon. Both of them looked at him coldly.

"Good morning, Thomas," Mary said at last. "We are not asleep, and funny as it may seem, we do not think that you are amusin'."

"And Mackie is not fat," Dickie added. "And if you didn't know, both of us have been very, very ill with whoopers. That's why we've come here early. We've got to have lots of fresh air."

"There's plenty of that about this morning," Tom laughed. "Aunt Betty sent you a message. Says she'd like to see you, and I can't think why... She'd like to see you, too, Pete. We weren't sure what was happening, and now our telephone has gone, so Uncle will be going down to Onnybrook in the Land Rover to raise a riot."

Agnes poured him a cup of tea and told him to remove some of his jerseys and sit by the fire until they were ready.

"Don't mind if I do," Tom said. "I've been up for hours, and it's an odd thing, but somebody was up as soon as I was, because there are tracks coming from here past the farm and down the lane. Had a visitor?"

"Yes, we have," Peter replied quickly. "We'll tell you all about that later. What news of Jenny?"

Tom smiled. "O.K., I reckon. Still reading books and writing letters. Hope to get her over here afore Christmas, but this snow makes it difficult. How's David?"

"I'm sure he's all right-----" Peter began, and then the twins interrupted her.

"Peter knows all about him, of course. David's only our brother. He doesn't write to us, but we think he must be very well."

Tom glared at them and they subsided. It would be fun going to Ingles presently, and there didn't seem much sense in upsetting Tom before they went. The trouble was that they never got their own way with Tom, and he knew it.

Peter pretended not to notice the interruption. "He'll be up in a day or two, Tom, but he hasn't broken up yet. Mr. and Mrs. Morton are coming, too, and I expect they'll come by road. We'll hear from them soon."

While they were finishing their breakfast she went on to tell him that she wanted to get to Hatchholt this morning.

"Let's try it together," Tom suggested. "I can help you with your luggage, and the snow may not be too deep in the valleys. I reckon Uncle will let me off work to-day for there's not much doing, and it doesn't look as if it'll snow again yet."

Peter had been hoping that Tom would suggest this, and as Agnes could see no reason why the twins should not go down to Ingles, the four of them set off together half an hour later with Macbeth.

"Don't ever forget us, dear Agnes," Dickie said as they stood in the porch. "Promise you won't go out and get lost in the snow. Would you like us to ask Uncle Alf Ingles to bring us back lots of food from Onnybrook? Have you got enough to last us, Agnes?"

"Be off with you," the housekeeper said with a twinkle in her eye. "I'm looking forward to a bit o' peace. And just behave yourselves with Mrs. Ingles... Good-bye, Peter. You're always welcome here, as you know, and that's what Mrs. Morton would wish me to say. Don't take any risks in the valley, for we'll get a message through to your father somehow... No doubt I'll be seeing you again soon, Tom, and thanks to you for bringing up the milk."

The sun was shining brightly from a clear sky and was beginning to melt the snow on the hedges as they started down the lane. The twins, in their rubber boots and duffle coats, were soon ahead with Macbeth, because Peter, in her school shoes, had to pick her way carefully. Tom was amused by her school uniform and Peter was rather annoyed by his attitude because there was not much difference between their ages.

"Aunt Betty will have to lend you rubber boots, Pete. You can't go up the valley in those sissy shoes."

"I'll be grateful, and you can take them back to her, Tom! Just five minutes after I'm home I'll be in my old clothes. Is my case very heavy? I'm sorry if it is."

"We'll both be tired of it by the time we get to Hatchholt, Pete. What was all the mystery about a visitor last night?"

"Isn't time to give you the whole story now, Tom. I'll tell you when we're on our own... That looks like Mr. Ingles backing out in the Land Rover. I suppose that can get through any snow-drifts? Now he's seen the twins."

Mr. Ingles was a big, hearty man with a voice to match. He never said anything quietly, and Mrs. Morton had once remarked that there seemed no need for the farmer to have a telephone installed!

"BLESS ME IF IT ISN'T YOU TWO RASCALS AGAIN?" they heard him roar. "BETTY! HERE'S TWINS COME TO SEE US."

The twins were very fond of Mr. Ingles, and Peter and Tom watched Mary greet him suitably when he jumped down from the driving seat. Then he saw Peter and Tom and waved another greeting, and when Peter reached the farmyard gate he put a strong arm round her shoulders and hugged her so hard that she hadn't enough breath to ask him to stop.

He took them all into the kitchen, where Mrs. Ingles was cooking as if she had an army to feed, instead of one large husband and a smallish nephew, but when Peter managed to get a word in, she explained to Mr. Ingles about getting home as soon as possible. He understood at once.

"Can't telephone your dad," he bellowed. "Dratted wires gone as usual, but we'll soon get that put right. Young Tom'll go with you..."

Peter tried to explain that Tom had already offered, but it was Mrs. Ingles who warned them to be careful and to come straight back if they found the drifts too heavy.

"There's more snow to come, my dears. If I were you, Peter, I'd persuade your dad to take his Christmas holiday and get out of Hatchholt for a while. You could both have a bad time up there if there's a proper blizzard, and you'd be a worry to all the folk round about... See what plans your dad has got and come down here for a week so that we know where you are. You'll both be welcome, won't they, Alf?"

"WELCOME! 'COURSE THEY WILL... COME AND FETCH 'EM MYSELF..."

Peter laughed and thanked them and said she'd speak to her father about it.

"And if the telephone in the village is working, please ring Daddy and tell him we're on our way," she asked Mr. Ingles, and then thankfully tried on a pair of his wife's rubber boots.

The twins then announced that they had a secret plan which was to be disclosed to Mrs. Ingles when Peter and Tom had gone, and seemed rather surprised when neither of them asked what it was. They came to the farmyard gate to see them off, however, and begged Peter to come back to Witchend soon, but Tom they allowed to go without a message of good will.

Peter knew every foot of the way across country from Ingles or Witchend to the Hatchholt valley, but it was not so easy in the snow to keep to the familiar tracks. The first three-quarters of a mile were fairly simple as the path wandered over some of Mr. Ingles' fields. Soon, however, it climbed a steep hill, then fell away steeply down the other side into a valley known as Dark Hollow. Once, the Hollow had been very wild and lonely, but a road now ran down it from the headquarters of the foresters at the edge of the State Forest high on the slopes of the Long Mynd itself. Hatchholt was the next valley to the north and ran from west to east parallel to Dark Hollow.

The narrow track linking the two valleys, along which Peter had so often ridden on Sally, was likely to be the most difficult part of the journey because it ran along the edge of a little stream.

Tom and Peter set off cheerfully enough across the fields in some fitful gleams of sunshine, and when they were halfway up the first slopes of Dark Hollow, Tom said what he had been thinking for a quarter of an hour.

"We're fools to cart your case through all this, Peter. If we'd left it at the farm Uncle would have brought it along in the Land Rover as soon as the thaw comes. You've got enough clothes to wear at home, haven't you?"

"I am sorry about it, Tom, but really I do want what's in it. There's a Christmas present for Daddy and lots of things I want. I'll take a turn, and once we're up the other side it won't be so bad if we can find the path because Hatchholt isn't very steep."

Tom grunted his disapproval of the ways of girls and struggled forward. At the top of the hill they rested and sat on the suit-case, looking down into the valley, while they shared a bar of chocolate which Tom found in his pocket.

They were alone in a white world. Higher up the valley on the slopes of the mountain they could see the orderly rows of trees in the State Forest, and below them it was possible to follow the course of the road by the tracks left by one of the forester's lorries. Faintly through the still air came the thin screech of saws working up at the saw-mill.

"Can't stay here too long, else we'll get cold," Tom said. "Tell me now about this mysterious visitor of yours at Witchend."

She told him about Primrose Wentworth and how odd it seemed that she should be hiking by herself on such a day, and how foolish it was of her to try to reach Witchend in the dark.

"She'd got a map, Tom, and it would have been so much easier for her to have gone straight along the Portway and down to Plowden if she wanted to get to the *White Horse* for the night."

"That dump!" Tom said. "Looks as if it's falling to pieces! I once heard Uncle Alf say that he didn't know how the chap there could make a living... Tell you something, Peter. All hikers are crazy and your Primrose must have been madder than most... She wasn't - sort of up to something, was she?"

Peter laughed. "What could she be up to, Tom? She was all right, I'm sure. Rather decent, I thought, and seemed grateful to Agnes, and so she should be. But she was curious in a way I can't quite explain. Not exactly nosey, but she couldn't seem to understand why anybody should want to live at a house as lonely as Witchend, and she kept on asking questions about how near it was to the forest and how did we get to the top of the Mynd... And the funny thing is that I believe she was really scared of the idea of being cut off by the snow. In the note she left she actually had the nerve to advise us to leave the house while it was safe... Anyway, it was lucky that Agnes heard her last night... Oh, well! Let's forget her now and get moving. I'll take the case as it's downhill."

They slithered down the steep slope as best they could, and Tom tried using the suit-case as a toboggan without much success. Then they crossed the road and traced the beginning of the narrow track which would take them into Hatchholt by the stream which marked their way. Tom slipped into the icy water once, but it wasn't very deep and he flung the suit-case to safety. Peter tried not to laugh, but Tom was very good-humoured and obviously enjoying his morning. As soon as they were in the Hatchholt valley the path up to the cottage and the reservoir was easy to follow because it ran beside the great pipeline which carried the water down into the plain and on to one of the midland cities.

"I'm excited, Tom," Peter admitted. "It's always the same when I come home up the valley. My heart thumps like anything. I don't exactly forget what Daddy looks like, but it's always a thrill when I see him looking like I hope he will... And there's Sally, too. She'll be in the stable, but I'll have to ride her to-day... Tell you what, Tom. You stay and have a meal with us now, and then we'll take Sally up to the top of the Mynd and you can have a ride on her, too. How are you getting on with your riding?"

"Not often," Tom grinned. "I have to get on too often. We've only got old Darkie at the farm now, and I'd rather ride a tractor any day. Will your dad

mind me coming? He's mighty particular, isn't he?"

"Not of *my* friends, Tom. He likes you... Look! There's the smoke from the chimney... Do you mind if I run ahead, Tom? I want to surprise Daddy."

The little stone house which was Peter's home was set snugly against the hillside with a garden made by Mr. Sterling on the south side to catch the sun, and a shed, which was Sally's stable in such weather as this, and a yard on the other. As Tom toiled up the last sixty yards of the slope he saw Peter standing with her father in the porch waiting for him.

Mr. Sterling was an old employee of the Water Company, and had been given the house on retirement, with the responsibility of keeping an eye on the reservoir and seeing that the sluices were adjusted from time to time so that the right amount of water ran down the pipeline.

Peter, flushed and with shining eyes, ran forward to meet Tom and took the suit-case from him. Mr. Sterling followed and held out his hand.

"Good morning, Thomas. Thank you indeed for your help to Petronella. I beg you to come in out of the cold and refresh yourselves."

He nearly always spoke like this, and Tom, try as he would, found it difficult not to think of him as a character in a film.

There were only four rooms in the cottage, but each was so spotlessly clean, so polished and gleaming, that all Peter's friends were scared to tread on the floor with their outdoor shoes on.

"I knew you were on your way," Mr. Sterling explained to Tom as he began to lay the table in the tiny living-room. "Mr. Ingles was kind enough to telephone from the village. The machine" - he always referred to the telephone as the machine - "has disturbed me three times this morning. I have news for Petronella, but we must wait until she comes down."

Peter was making a lot of cheerful noise upstairs changing into holiday clothes as she had promised, and by the time she came down in a blue jersey and her old jodhpurs her father had opened a tin of corned beef, cut

some bread and butter and made some tea. While they were eating he told them that his brother, Micah Sterling, of the farm over by the Stiperstones called "Seven Gates," had rung up to ask him to go over there as soon as possible and stay over Christmas. Peter was asked, too, and Mr. Sterling admitted that Micah was afraid, by the look of the weather, that Hatchholt could easily be snowed up over the holiday. The other telephone call was from the water company to suggest that their old servant should get out of the cottage until the thaw, when he would not be so cut off from the outside world.

It took him a long time to tell them all this, but Peter realized at once that he was tempted by the idea of going to Seven Gates.

"Of course you must go, Daddy. The Mortons will be up in a day or two, and if there isn't room for me at Witchend, Mrs. Ingles says she'd like me at the farm. You try and go to-morrow. Ring up Uncle Micah presently and tell him you'll come as soon as you can. The foresters are using the Dark Hollow road and p'raps Mr. Ingles would give you a lift over to Seven Gates from there. Do you think it's going to snow again and what's it like up there?"

"I have not been up beyond the reservoir, but the snow will lie evenly on the top, as you know. It would be hard going on foot, but you should go up on Sally, my dear, and see for yourself. There is more snow to come."

"There you are, then. All the more reason why you should go to Uncle Micah. We don't want to spend Christmas up here by ourselves, and if you're at Seven Gates I shan't worry about you if you're there and I'm at Witchend."

Mr. Sterling did not need much more persuasion, and as the weather was still bright he sent them out to saddle Sally while he "tidied up."

Sally, a sturdy little Welsh pony, made a great fuss of her mistress. She hated being in a stable, but it was only while there was snow on the ground that she was kept indoors. Peter saddled her quickly and persuaded Tom to come with her.

"We won't be very long, Tom, and if it looks as if you'll be late you can ride her home to Ingles and keep her there till I come back again. Do come up to the top with me and have a gallop."

Tom didn't need much persuading. Oddly enough, although he lived so near, he had only been on the flat top of the Mynd twice and he had never seen it under snow.

Above the Hatchholt reservoir the track wound gently up to the rolling plateau. Peter, and Sally, too, knew the way by the stream and where it skirted the bog at the head of the valley. As soon as they were at the top Peter jumped off the pony and handed the reins to Tom.

"Give her a gallop, Tom. Even if you do fall off you can't hurt yourself. What I love about this place is the loneliness. We can see for miles, but there isn't a soul in sight... It makes you feel it's your own private world," she added shyly.

Tom looked puzzled. He hadn't often heard Peter talk like this, but she was certainly right about the loneliness. They were facing due west now and about half a mile ahead it was possible to see where the Portway ran. Beyond the old road the Mynd rose again to its highest point of 1,600 feet at Pole Bank, and from there they would be able to see the summit of the Stiperstones crowned with the black rocks of the Devil's Chair. Further to their left, also beyond the road and on the horizon, were the hangars and club-house of the Gliding Club built on the very edge of the western escarpment of the Mynd to make for easy launching of the gliders. To the south, where the mountain rolled away towards Plowden and the shabby *White Horse* inn, they could see the tree-tops of the State Forest.

"Ride her over towards the gliding station," Peter urged. "I'll trot along after you and keep warm, but if I'm too long ride back and meet me."

Tom hadn't much idea of riding and looked very awkward as Sally broke into a trot. Soon he was only a dot in the distance as Peter hurried after him. A glider suddenly appeared in the sky, swooped down towards her and then soared up in a lift of warmer air. Peter wasn't interested in gliders, although there were always plenty of them over the Mynd in the spring and summer,

and so she no more than glanced up as this one whistled overhead. Tom then turned back and just as they met about two hundred yards from the road the silence was broken by the sound of a car coming from the direction of Church Stretton.

"How could a car get up the valley in this snow?" Peter wondered. "There it is now, Tom, just coming over the rise. It looks like a Land Rover. I'd like to see who it is. Let me get up on Sally."

Peter was right. It was a green truck with a canvas top, and Tom saw Peter waving violently as it came nearer.

The driver stopped, and as Tom came up Peter introduced him.

"Do you know Donald Gibbs, Tom? He's a very, very important man to do with the forest. He's the next man to the boss, aren't you, Donald? And do tell us what you're doing up here. Did you come up from Stretton?"

Gibbs grinned cheerfully at Tom. He was short and thick-set, with fair hair and grey eyes. His face was tanned a brick red, and he was well muffled up against the weather.

"Tom Ingles, of course. How are you? Know your uncle as everybody round here does. Just telling Peter it's nice to see her again and asking her to come down and see young Jonathan. There's a new Gibbs in my home since she was last there."

Peter jumped off Sally so that she could talk more easily to him.

"We'll be glad to see a thaw, though it doesn't feel like one, and we won't be sorry when Christmas is over. Next ten days aren't much fun for us, and we're short-handed already with sickness."

"But what makes you so busy and worried now, sir?" Tom asked. "What's Christmas got to do with it?"

"Over there on your side of the Mynd we've got thousands of young conifers coming along splendidly. They're just the right size for Christmas

trees and there's a ready sale for them in street markets all over the country. We like to guard ours this time of year, specially as we hear there have been some big raids on forests in Norfolk and Suffolk already."

"But isn't it too late now?" Peter asked.

"Not yet. Trees stolen from here may well be selling in London next day... We've built a watch-tower since the summer, Peter. You can see it from here. I'll take you up one day. We're thinking of putting a guard in that tower for a fortnight while the moon is full, but of course we really use the tower for fire guards."

"Would the forest burn now?" Tom asked. "I s'pose some of the bigger trees are very dry under the snow."

"They would burn in a strong wind, specially if the fire started in a part where we haven't cleared away the bushes and bracken. Summer is the dangerous time for fires, when hikers and holiday-makers come up here and throw down cigarette ends and light a fire to boil a kettle... I've been out this morning to test the roads and came up through Stretton with a struggle. We like to know we can keep our few roads open round here... Don't stay up here too long. There's more snow about. Cheerio."

He waved cheerfully, and the heavy tyres of the Land Rover flung up the snow disdainfully as it roared down the Portway towards the forest.

They watched him out of sight, and Peter was just suggesting that they should go as far as the Gliding Club when they heard the sound of another heavy car. They looked right and left, but could see nothing, and then Peter remembered.

"There's a very steep winding road up from the valley to the club used by cars towing their gliders. Maybe the snow isn't as thick this side and it's one of those cars coming up. Did you see the glider just now?"

Tom nodded and pointed to the brow of the hill. As they watched, a huge lorry, with steam hissing from the radiator, crawled up over the brow, hauling a glider's trolley.

"I'm curious, Tom," Peter said. "I want to see who is crazy enough to come up here on a day like this."

She galloped off and Tom watched her ride alongside the lorry as it turned south. It didn't stop, and she was soon back.

"It's funny, Tom. I couldn't see the driver properly because his window was up and he didn't take any notice of me, but he reminded me of the man who gave us a lift up from Onnybrook last night. I don't think it could have been him, though, because his lorry had the word 'Removals' on the side, and the name of the firm, too, and this one was plain. I looked carefully. Funny, though... Come on, Tom. Come to Witchend with me and you can ride Sally back to Ingles."

4. The Twins' Adventure

The twins sat on the top bar of the gate of Ingles farm-yard and watched Peter and Tom set off on their journey to Hatchholt. Macbeth sat and watched them, too, with his head on one side.

"Well!" Dickie said. "I bet Tom will soon be fed up with Peter's luggage. I wonder when she'll be back? It would be fun if she's here for Christmas... What are we going to do now, twin?"

"We're going to do something by ourselves. We'll manage Agnes and Mrs. Ingles will help us, too... I'll tell you what we'll do, Dickie. We'll go to the Lone Pine camp with explorers' rations and well take some paper and some matches and we'll make a fire, and we'll live up there all day an'-----"

Dickie slid off the gate.

"Eskimos!" he said triumphantly. "That's what we are. They live in houses made of snow with a little door, an' they crawl in backwards an' stay there all the winter. I've forgotten what they call their little houses, but it's a most peculiar name."

"Why do they crawl in backwards?"

"I've seen pictures of them. An' if not backwards it's because they look practically the same back or front, if you know what I mean."

Mary nodded as if she did know, but this was one of the very few occasions when she had no idea what her twin was talking about. Then she, too, jumped off the gate and followed Dickie across the farmyard into Mrs. Ingles' kitchen.

"And now what are you going to do, my dears? 'Tis fine and bright and you should be out o' doors getting rid of those coughs... And if you can wait ten minutes there'll be a batch of hot cakes ready for you to try."

"One of the things we love so very much 'bout you, Aunt Betty," Mary began as she sidled round the table, "One of the lots of lovely things is that you seem to know exactly what it is we want to do most... Just now, after we'd seen Peter and Tom off on their long an' weary journey, my twin an' me said we wanted to get rid of our coughs by going out exploring."

"Explorers have got to carry food with 'em," Dickie said practically. "And if you could spare us a little to take with us and some paper and matches, we're going to build a snow-hut like the Eskimos in a secret place."

"Bless my soul! I never knew such a pair o' rascals! I'll give you enough to keep yourselves alive, but perhaps you can tell me what Eskimos eat? Do they eat hot buns?"

"Not too many," Dickie said. "They eat something special. They eat rubber."

Mrs. Ingles' mouth opened with astonishment. "Now you're being silly, young man. You're trying one o' your tricks on me. Rubber indeed! "

"Blubber, he means." Mary laughed triumphantly. "His school isn't as good as mine. I don't know what it is, but I think it's fat, and I hate the sound of it... But if you could give us a little something like Dickie said, that would be wonderful."

"Come along, then. Come into the pantry with me and let's see if we can find something instead of Mary's blubber... But whatever you do and wherever you go you must promise me that you'll tell Agnes."

They promised her that Agnes should know, and twenty minutes later they were crossing the farmyard again. Dickie had a bundle of dry newspapers and some matches in his pocket, while Mary carried a large parcel of explorers' rations and Macbeth pranced happily beside them. As soon as they were out of sight of the farm Mary stopped and put the parcel on the ground.

"If you've got a pencil, twin, I think it would be better if we wrote a letter to Agnes 'bout all this. There were some sheets of paper on Aunt Betty's dresser I just borrowed. Agnes is very, very nice, but p'raps she wouldn't

quite understand about Eskimos and the fire we're going to make at our camp... We'll write a letter and just slip it under the door an' surprise her, Dickie."

"You mean she might surprise us by saying 'No' if we told her first, don't you, Mary? That would be a pity. Give me the paper. I'll write it. I've got a pencil."

He fumbled in the pocket of his duffle coat, and crouched under the hedge and pencilled this message.

"Dear Agnes, Please do not worry about us as we are very well and quite safe, and by the time you read this we will be quite near to you, and acksherly we are really guarding Witchend and you. We have been to Ingles and Aunt Betty has helped us to be explorers with food. There is plenty of food for us, so we shall not starve and we shall be warm. We shall be warm although we are Eskimos building their snow-hut, and you might see the smoke of our camp fire watching over you. So do not worry as we have our dinner, but if it snows badly we shall come home.

"With love from Richard and Mary Morton.

"P.S. Macbeth is safe with us as he may have to draw our sledge over the trackless, icy waists."

"It's very long," was Mary's wise comment. "I s'pose we had to say it all, but it's really only the bit about not worrying that she wants to know about... You take the blubber now and go up the side of the wood so that she doesn't see you if she looks out of the window, and I'll creep up and put it under the door... And take Mackie, too."

Dickie nodded and called the dog as his sister ran ahead up the lane towards Witchend. Just before he reached the gate he turned to the left and began to climb the hill by the edge of the larch wood. As soon as he was high enough he dodged between the trees and looked down at their house in the valley and was amused to see Mary crawling under the wall so that she could not be seen from any of the downstairs windows. This meant that she had safely delivered the note, so he waited for her as she came panting up the hill.

Mackie ran to meet her and she rested against a tree trunk for a few minutes to recover her breath.

"Did you see her, Mary?"

"No, but I could hear her humming a hymn like she does, so I expect she's happy enough. Come on. I can see the Lone Pine now, so let's hurry."

"That's all right, but we don't really want Agnes to know where we are, do we? If she comes to the door just stand quite still, twin. She won't notice us then."

The site of the Lone Pine camp, which had been discovered by Mary and Peter together, was a flat clearing on the hillside about a hundred yards from the edge of the larch wood. On three sides it was surrounded by gorse and only from above where the bracken was thick could it be seen or approached. In the centre of the little clearing was the lonely pine tree standing like a sentinel above the valley. From its branches it was possible to see not only Witchend and its yard and garden, but down the lane to Ingles half a mile away.

The twins struggled on up the steep slope at the edge of the wood, but the snow was so slippery that they soon found it easier under the trees, where they filled their pockets with twigs and cones for the fire. At last they were level with the Lone Pine, and after another twenty yards they were in the camp itself.

"Careful!" Dickie hissed. "There might be footprints. There might be an enemy lurkin'. I always think that when we come back again."

But there were no footprints, and the ground was covered by no more than a sprinkling of snow. Their fire-place - the shallow trough dug in the turf with two flat stones on each side of it - was still there, and so were the cold ashes of the last fire of the summer holidays. All else was as tidy as they had left it, and the end of the rope which they used for pulling themselves up into the tree was still coiled neatly round the trunk.

Mary leaned against the tree and put her hands behind her head.

"This is the most wonderful place we've ever found, twin, and I don't believe we've ever been here by ourselves before. Let's do something special, but let's light the fire first. Or shall I climb the look-out and look out?"

"It's a crows' nest," Dickie said. "We could be a ship stuck in the Arctic ice, couldn't we? And we could be rescued by Eskimos like I said, but it's going to be difficult to build a snow hut here 'cos there isn't enough snow. Where's Mackie?"

"Hunting. He'll get thorns in his paws. He's gone under those gorse bushes. Wolves, I expect. I'll climb up to the crow's nest while you light the fire."

She undid the rope and pulled herself up to the lowest branch on which she stood and looked down into the valley. At the bottom of the hill was the stream where they got their water, and beyond that was Witchend itself, looking like a toy model. On the branches of the larch trees the frozen snow sparkled in the pale sunlight and beyond the wood she could see the roofs of Ingles half a mile down the lane. From Witchend's chimney came a haze of blue smoke, but she was too far away to smell it. There was no sign of Agnes or any other sign of life.

"We're marooned here, captain," she called down to Dickie. "The cowardly crew have left us here to starve, captain. I can see the icebergs a' closing in on us. There's whales and things frisking fiercely round those old bergs. What are we going to eat, captain?"

Dickie looked up in surprise. They didn't often talk like this when they were alone together, and he thought she was doing it rather well, and he liked being called captain, too.

"We'll live on our 'mergency rations, mate," he replied out of the side of his mouth. "I'm unpacking 'em now. Come down from aloft and smash open these cases. We must make a fire afore the cold eats into our bones."

Mary slid down the rope.

"Buck up with the fire, Dickie. I asked Aunt Betty for some potatoes to roast and those'll keep our bones warm."

With a few twists of paper, some twigs and the dry cones the fire burned up brightly with one match, and while Mary unpacked the food parcel Dickie ran back to the wood for more fuel. And as soon as the ashes were really glowing they thrust in four big potatoes to roast in their jackets. The hill sheltered them from a cool breeze from the south-east and they were warm enough in their duffle coats as they crouched round the fire munching Mrs. Ingles' sandwiches. Soon they forgot about being marooned sailors with icebergs closing in round them and talked about Christmas presents and whether they could invent a play which they could all act to the family on Christmas Day.

They were sucking their scorched fingers after putting butter into the first pair of roast potatoes when they heard a curious whistling sound overhead. Almost before they could move, an odd-looking shadow raced across the snow-covered hillside, and they looked up to see a glider swooping over the treetops.

"Don't move, twin," Dickie whispered, as if the pilot could have heard them. "We don't want anybody to see us here. I'd like to fly like that. You could see everything up there if you went high enough... All the Mynd and Hatchholt and all the valleys and what everybody is doing. We'd look like miserable little ants, I s'pose."

Mary watched the glider soar away out of sight beyond the mountain.

"So we would, twin. Like little ants. I don't think I'm keen on that. I like to see people full size," and with this profound observation she puffed steam from her mouth in an effort to cool the portion of hot potato on her tongue.

They piled more wood on the fire, and when they had finished their meal Dickie climbed into the crow's nest to see if the rescue party was yet in sight crossing the icepack. They were not. He saw something so unexpected that he could hardly believe his eyes.

"There's somebody spying about outside Witchend," he whispered hoarsely.

Mary looked up as Mackie, who was enjoying a biscuit, suddenly growled.

"Keep Mackie quiet," Dickie hissed. "Stay where you are, twin, and don't let him bark... It's a strange woman skulking there. Not Agnes... Don't let the fire smoke, Mary. Nobody must see us. I'll tell you about it in a sec."

Mary clutched Mackie as he coughed over the biscuit crumbs and looked up at her twin standing on the branch.

"She'll see you if she looks up, won't she, Dickie? Who is it? Why don't you tell me? I can hear you, but she can't."

For a moment Dickie made no answer, but when he slid down and stood beside her he looked wildly excited.

"Pack up everything quick!" he hissed. "We're going to have an adventure, twin. We've got to follow her. Put Mackie on the lead and don't make a noise. We've got to hurry."

"But who is it?" Mary whispered. "Tell me, Dickie. Who is it we've got to follow, and why?"

"Listen, Mary. I'm sure the woman skulking down there is that Primrose Wentworth. She's wearing the same clothes. She was crouching down behind the wall so that nobody in the house could see her, and now she's gone off by herself up that path under the trees. She's up to something sinister, and we've got to see where she's going."

Mary clipped on Mackie's lead.

"What path? Do you mean the path from the back door where Agnes found her last night?"

"Come on, Mary. We'll have to slide down the hill and cross the stream without her seeing us. She's gone up that other old path - the one that's all grown over with brambles. Do you remember we tried to explore it in the summer?"

Mary nodded. She was remembering that only last night she had dreamed that they were going to have an adventure, and this might be it. If they could find out what this woman was doing so stealthily they would certainly have something to boast about.

"Come on, then. But where does that old path lead, Dickie?"

"P'raps we'll soon know. We mustn't let her see us." They slipped and slithered down the hill by the side of the larch wood and turned to the left into the sunken track down which Dickie had seen Primrose hurrying a few minutes ago.

As soon as they were out of the sun they shivered and pulled up the hoods of their duffle coats. Mackie tugged on his lead and they found it difficult to be quiet because twigs cracked under their feet. The path they were following was almost a tunnel and the branches of the trees overhead had kept the snow from the ground. Suddenly it broadened out and Dickie, who was in front, stopped in astonishment.

"But we never knew this path was here, Mary. We never got so far before. It's a sort of secret road - and it's quite wide now."

"So it is." She looked up at the gloomy pine trees. "This is the sort of forest woodcutters use. The sort of wood that Hansel and Gretel were lost in. It's funny that it's so near Witchend and that we've never explored it. I don't think I like it much... Yes. It's quite wide enough for a woodcutter's cart, isn't it?"

"Don't be so soppy, Mary. Keep a tight hold on Mackie, and let's run as far as we can see ahead until we come to a corner."

Their feet made no sound on the pine needles and Mackie, seeming to realize their excitement, behaved himself and ran quietly, too. They were soon out of breath because the bumpy track led them steadily uphill, but at last it turned sharply to the left and Dickie stopped a few yards from the corner.

"I'll crawl ahead and see if she's in sight," he whispered. "Stay there and keep Mackie tight on the lead."

With wildly thumping heart Mary watched her twin pretending he was a Red Indian on the trail. As he crept forward on hands and knees, keeping well in to the side of the track behind some bushes, she knelt too and put her arms round Mackie.

"Be good, Mackie. We're trusting you to guard us." He wagged his tail as if he understood, and when she looked up again Dickie was racing back towards her.

"There's another corner not far ahead, but I can see a burning cigarette end, Mary. She must be quite near. We'll have to go carefully now."

"I can't remember whether Primrose smokes, Dickie. Did you see her with a cigarette last night?"

"I can't remember, but of course it's her. Buck up."

Five minutes later, when it was Mary's turn to crawl at a corner, she saw that they were right. About fifty yards ahead Primrose Wentworth, with only a very slight limp, was striding forward with the help of a stick. There was no mistaking her. Mary turned to make a signal of triumph to her brother when Mackie growled and gave a short, sharp bark. She flung herself flat on the pine needles while Dickie fell on poor Macbeth, so that his warning bark collapsed like a burst balloon. Primrose turned round while Mary prayed that the ground would swallow her up. She dared not move and try to roll further into the bushes, but when at last she raised her head an inch or two and looked up, Primrose was already nearly out of sight again.

Macbeth was very contrite when Dickie let him up with the most awful threats that if he did that again he would be tied to a tree and left until they came back that way - if they ever did.

"We've got to find out what she's doing," he whispered. "This is another adventure just for us, so come on. Stick it."

They were very careful because Primrose was now only about two hundred yards ahead. Now they were out of the dark wood it was much lighter and there was some frozen snow underfoot. Another corner. Dickie crawled forward five yards and then raced back again.

"There's some blackberry bushes right across the path, but I can see her head. We've got up to the forest. There's millions of little Christmas trees in long rows each side of the path and she's looking at 'em. An' while I was watching her and wishing that I'd got a telescope she turned round and looked straight at me, just as if she could see me behind the bushes. Why should she want to come limping all the way up here just to look at a trillion little trees?... Shall we go on?"

"I'm tired," Mary admitted. "All the same, I think we'd better know where she's going... P'raps to the foresters' camp? We must be quite near that, twin, but we've never been before, have we? Let's go a bit farther, anyway... I think Mackie is tired, too. His legs are so short..."

But they were to be much more tired before their adventure was over!

Primrose no longer seemed to be in a hurry, but it was difficult to follow her because there was so little cover on each side of the wide track. They were afraid she might look round, but she didn't. She was too interested in the thousands of little trees growing in straight rows like soldiers on parade.

"It's funny that we've never been up this way before," Dickie whispered. "Peter has told us about the forest, of course, but I don't believe that she knows about that old path leading up to it... An' we don't know where the foresters' cottages are either."

Mary's teeth were chattering.

"We can't be far from the top of the Mynd now, Dickie. And if it's only those baby trees she wants to see, she might turn round and come back the same way. What shall we do then? It's getting late, too. And I'm cold."

Dickie looked at her in surprise. She was usually the leader, and this didn't sound at all like her. He knew that it would be much more sensible to turn

back now, but he was very curious about Primrose.

"We'll go back if you like, twin, but remember what we shall be able to tell the others. I don't really want to tell them we got tired and went home just when Primrose was sort of super sinister. Let's follow her for ten more minutes, anyway. Even if she does come back she can't do anything to us. We're just out for a walk lookin' at trees like she is."

Mary nodded and clenched her teeth and they went on cautiously up the side of the broad track. Soon they left the nurseries of young trees behind and reached a part of the forest where the trees were nine or ten feet high. Here the track had been freshly ploughed, but farther on there was dead bracken under the trees. Primrose was still just in sight when Dickie said, "If she threw another cigarette in that bracken it would burn like anything. That's why they plough it up, of course. We didn't think of that, did we?"

"I think that woman is mad," Mary said faintly. "If she goes along the top of the Mynd in the snow then we shall know she is for certain. I'm not going much farther, Dickie... She's almost out of sight now and I don't really care where she goes. I wish I'd never seen her."

Dickie wouldn't give in, and ten minutes later they had left the trees behind and were on a little hill looking across the width of the mountain to the Portway. Far away to their right were the hangars of the gliding club, and as they saw Primrose walking straight across the snow-covered plateau, the red-winged glider they had seen earlier over the Lone Pine camp came sailing over their heads again. It seemed to tilt its wings as it passed above Primrose, and although they couldn't be sure they thought she waved to the pilot as it sailed away.

"All right, Mary," Dickie said. "Maybe she's like you said. Crazy. She said she lived in Stretton, and she's walking away from it, unless she's making straight for the Portway instead of cutting across. There's *nothing* over there, is there?"

"Only that horrible old ruined cottage almost on the edge of the mountain. That beastly, ghostly place we looked at once with David and Peter. I wouldn't go near it for anything... She'll be lost again if she isn't careful."

It will be dark in an hour... Come on, twin. We must run all the way back now."

It was easier going back down the hill, but they might well have taken the wrong fire-break if they had not had the sense to follow their own footprints in the snow. All went well until they were nearing the plantations of young trees on the lower slopes of the forest, when they heard a man shouting behind them.

"Hi there! Come here, you two."

It was the sort of voice which meant business, so they stopped and turned round while Mackie barked his defiance. The man stood in the middle of the track with a gun under his arm.

"Come here, I said. You're trespassing."

The twins, with Mackie half throttling himself on his lead, walked back. He was a thin, dark man with a swarthy skin and keen blue eyes and was wearing brown corduroy trousers, a thick woollen jersey with a high collar and a tweed jacket with leather patches at the elbows. He looked very angry.

"How did you get in here?" he repeated.

The twins glanced at each other and knew that this was not the time for a long story in their usual manner.

"If you belong to the forest we'll tell you," Dickie began.

"And if you don't, we don't see why you should be so angry with us," Mary added.

"Tell me, and don't argue," the man snapped, and they didn't. They told him that they knew the country well and proved it, and added that they'd seen someone walking up through the forest and decided to follow her. They saw at once that he didn't believe them, so Dickie added quickly:

"We know the woman's name because she stayed at Witchend last night. We think she's exploring the Mynd, and when she was lower down the path there and we were coming along behind her, she dropped a burning cigarette end. We saw it. She wasn't very far ahead then. We stamped on it."

"So you know about the danger of lighting fires in the forest, do you? You wouldn't ever do that, would you?"

"Not in here we wouldn't, but we've got a secret camp in our own forest, thank you," Mary said indignantly. "You seem to think we don't know anything."

The man smiled unexpectedly.

"I believe you. Where did this mysterious lady friend of yours go when she got to the top?"

"We don't know. She was walking towards the Portway across the snow, and we think she's a bit peculiar. May we go now?"

"I guess she certainly was peculiar. Come on, then. I'll see you on your way, but you must remember that you've no right in the forest."

After that he was quite nice and told them that he was one of the foresters called a warrener whose job it was to keep the forest free of squirrels and rabbits and to look out for trespassers. He told them, too, that he had a dog who was at home with a poisoned paw, and he admired Mackie, who was behaving very well on his lead, and so won Mary's heart.

They said "Good-bye" to him at the edge of the forest where the young trees were growing, and ran home through the dusk as fast as they could. It was almost dark in the sunken track, and when they came out into the open they saw the welcoming lights of Witchend.

"Shall we arrive all out of breath?" Dickie panted. "Or shall we stop here and calm down? P'raps it would be better if Agnes saw how hard we've

been trying to get back to her?"

Mary nodded as she let Mackie off the lead. She had stitch and was sure it would be better to get trouble with Agnes over as soon as possible, so she just ran on without speaking.

But even as they opened the front door they sensed that something was wrong. They called for Agnes, but once again when they wanted her she was missing.

They ran upstairs, and then they looked outside the scullery door, but there was no sign of her anywhere, although Mary noticed that her coat, which usually hung behind the front door, had gone. The table was laid and there were three brown eggs on a plate ready to be popped in the saucepan on the stove.

"I hate this, Dickie," Mary gulped. "Let's go down to Ingles and tell them... Come, Mackie."

They trotted down the lane, and just before they reached the farm they heard familiar voices, and there was Tom opening the gate of one of his uncle's fields for Peter, who was riding Sally.

"Oh! Petah!" Mary sobbed. "Agnes has vanished again just like last night. We've just got back and the house is empty. And we looked outside, too. We hate it."

Peter slipped off the pony's back and handed the reins to Tom.

"If you've only just got home, maybe she's at Ingles asking for you. You've been out much too long, anyway."

They looked at her aghast. Peter never spoke to them like this. Then Mary sniffed and said quietly, "We're sorry, Petah. We've had an adventure we'll tell you about, but do please see if Agnes is here."

"I'll look after Sally," Tom said as he opened the farmyard gate. "Tell Aunt Betty I won't be long, and let me know if Agnes has run away and left these

two. There are times when I wouldn't blame her."

Mary put out her tongue at him, but it was too dark for him to see, and then ran across the yard. As soon as the kitchen door opened she heard Agnes' voice and rushed in and hugged her. Mr. and Mrs. Ingles were there, too, and when Peter followed everyone talked at once and Agnes did not have much chance to scold them.

"A cup o' tea for you all and no nonsense," Mrs. Ingles insisted as she went to the china cupboard, "and while I'm making it you can finish the story of your visitor, Agnes."

"Another visitor?" Peter laughed as she slipped her rucksack from her back. "Not at Witchend? I've come to stay, please, Agnes dear. Daddy has packed up and gone to Seven Gates... But what's this about another visitor?"

Agnes took off her coat and looked inquiringly at the farmer.

"I reckoned Mr. Ingles ought to know about this," she began. "Seems a bit queer to me, and as I thought these two rascals might still be here - and I've not had my say about you yet, Richard and Mary - I reckoned I'd pop along and-----"

"That's fine, Agnes," Mr. Ingles roared. "You've popped! Now tell us what's queer."

"I'm reckoning to tell you, and I must ask you not to shout at me, Alf Ingles. 'Twas like this. Middle of afternoon it was. Half after three maybe when there comes a knock on the door. And there's a pleasant-looking and pleasant-speaking chap a' standing there in a big, sandy-coloured overcoat and raising his cap to me. I'll not tell you all he said, but it was about wanting to have a party up here over Christmas for winter sports. Said money didn't matter so long as they could have 'Witchend' right away----- Was as much as I could do to get a word in edgeways, but he badgered me to give him Mr. Morton's address, and a lot of other nosey questions besides."

Mr. Ingles, who was lighting his pipe, dropped the match in surprise.

"Bless me!" he roared. "Did you hear that, Betty? Just listen to me, Agnes. That chap came here, too. Asking questions and the like. Wanted to know if Witchend was the only house besides this up this way... Never seen the chap before in my life... Seems to me this place is getting like a health resort... "

5. More Strangers

Although Mrs. Ingles told Peter again that she would be welcome to stay with them at the farm as long as she liked, she decided to go back to Witchend with Agnes and the twins. It was obvious that the latter had got something special to tell her, but it was not until they went up to bed that their chance came.

Peter was amazed at their story of Primrose and how they had followed her up the hidden track to the forest.

"We'll talk it all over with Tom in the morning," she promised, "and I bet he'll be proud of you. Maybe we'll hear from the others, too, and I know David will want to know all about it. Well done, twins. Good night."

She was so tired herself that she came up to bed as soon as she had helped Agnes with the supper things. When she woke next morning it was only just light enough for her to see that it was seven o'clock. She began to think about Primrose. There hadn't seemed to be anything unpleasant or unusual about her, except her particular interest in the district and in Witchend. It was odd, of course, that she had gone out yesterday morning before any of them were awake, and even odder that she should come back hours later and crawl past the house as if she didn't want to be seen. And though the twins might have got muddled over some things, they had both been sure that when they had last seen her she was walking fast in the dusk towards the Portway. And it was odd again that she had gone out of her way to warn them that it would be unsafe for them to stay at Witchend if the snow continued.

Peter didn't like mysteries. Last night Dickie had said that Primrose was jolly sinister and had something to hide, and it really seemed as if he was right. Then there was Agnes' story of the polite gentleman who had called at Ingles and Witchend and wanted to rent the latter immediately for winter sports. Then, as she lay snuggled under the bedclothes, she felt her cheeks burn with the shock of another thought. The driver of the lorry who had given them a lift the first night had also been interested in Witchend and

asked curious questions about it. There wasn't and never had been anything special about it except its loneliness. Everybody for miles around knew the Mortons and liked them, and were glad when they had taken over Witchend as a holiday home. And everybody knew Agnes, and although she wasn't very genial and was sometimes laughed at in a friendly way, she was well liked, too. During the summer there were plenty of holiday-makers in the district, and most of them came back year after year, but now the place seemed to be alive with curious strangers, and there must be some reason for it.

Tom hadn't much time for mysteries either, and although he had proved himself to be a wonderful friend, she did hope that David would come soon. He always understood what was puzzling her, and although he didn't chatter as much as Tom, he got things done in his quiet way. As she slipped out of bed she thought how wonderful it would be to have him for Christmas and tell him all about the odd things which had happened from the moment they had stepped out into the snow on the platform at Onnybrook such a short time ago. She picked up her clothes, slipped on her dressing-gown and ran down to the living-room, where she knew that the fire would still be alight. For once she was down before Agnes, so she made some tea and took the pot and two cups up to the housekeeper's room, after telling Macbeth to stay where he was.

Rather to her surprise, Agnes asked her to come in, and Peter tried not to show her astonishment at the sight of the housekeeper in bed with a funny-looking little lace hat on her head.

"Bless me, child! What's wrong? I thought the house must be afire. I must have overslept. A cup o' tea? Reckon I've not had a treat like this for fifteen years since my dear William died."

Peter sat on the end of the bed and teased her a little about oversleeping, and told her that she would start the breakfast.

It was a horrid morning. The sky was dull and thick with sullen-looking clouds. The snow that had fallen in the night had drifted against the front door and covered all yesterday's footprints across the yard. Agnes told the twins that they were not to go out until she gave permission.

"And it's no use looking like that, Master Richard. I heard you cough up there in the bathroom, and it sounded like the roof was coming off. Here you stay in the warm until the sun comes out, whether you like it or not."

"If Mummy was here-----" Mary began, and then thought better of it.

"But when are they due to come, Agnes?" Peter said quickly. "Is it today or tomorrow, and are they coming in the car?"

"I was reckoning to get a letter or a message to-day," Agnes admitted, "but old Charlie the postman don't like this snow, so I reckon he'll leave any post for us at Ingles. Or maybe Mrs. Morton will telephone Ingles, and if Tom doesn't come up here soon perhaps you'll go down, Peter, and see what's happening?"

Peter could see that she was anxious and didn't want the twins to know it, so she decided not to remind her that the Ingles' telephone might still be out of order. After a long silence the twins glanced at each other across the table and Mary said:

"We quite understand about us not going out for a long explore like yesterday, Agnes, but there's something very, very important we've just got to do to-day. We didn't think of it yesterday because we were rather excited, but when we tell you we know you'll say 'Yes.' "

Agnes looked at her grimly.

"I have my doubts of that, young lady, but out with it."

"It's Christmas decorations, Agnes dear. We've got to go to Stretton to-day to buy paper chains and all that sort of thing. Once we've got them, Agnes, we'll stay here all day doing the decorating, and when the sun comes out perhaps you'll let us go to our secret place and decorate that, too," and here she turned to Peter and gave her a most significant wink.

"But you do see, Agnes, that we've *got* to have proper decorations to welcome Mummy and Daddy," Dickie pleaded. "We can buy everything we'll want in Stretton, but we've got to go soon, else the shops will sell out

and we shan't have time to make the paper chains... You do see what we mean, don't you, dear Agnes?"

Fortunately, Tom then arrived with the milk.

"Uncle meant to have told you last night, but they haven't been to mend the telephone yet. There's wires down all over the place, they say. He was thinking that maybe Mr. Morton would be wanting to get a message through to you. Even if he sends a telegram he reckons they won't be able to get it up to you and old Charlie hasn't arrived yet."

"It's good of you to come up, Tom," Agnes said. "All the same, we should be hearing from the family to-day, and I'd be glad of a message, though everything is ready for them here."

"What's the weather like, Tom?" Peter asked. "I was thinking that if we could get down to the post office at Onnybrook a telegram might be waiting for us there."

"Uncle says it didn't snow again till about five. He says we won't have any more for a bit and it's clearer now than it was afore breakfast. I could get you down to the village, though, if he'll let me have the blue tractor. We've got an old trolley we use for the milk churns and we could hitch that on behind and you could ride on that. He won't mind, and I could pick up anything you want in the village."

"That's it, Agnes!" Dickie shouted triumphantly. "Let's do that. We'll ride in the trolley and then we wouldn't even get snow in our boots... And you heard what Tom said. The sun is coming out soon."

Agnes opened the door and looked up at the sky. It certainly was brighter, and she did want to know if there was a telegram. Perhaps if Peter and Tom were with the twins and promised to keep an eye on them it would be all right? She tried to guess what their mother would have done and then was fairly sure that she would say "Yes."

"Very well, then," she said grudgingly. "But you're to look after them, Peter, and no nonsense."

The weather did improve, and Mr. Ingles agreed that the tractor was a good idea and would get them through any small drifts on the road. The trolley had a rail round it and was big enough to carry Peter, the twins and Macbeth. The Ingles' lane was in very bad condition, and it was no wonder that the postman had not arrived.

Tom rather enjoyed showing off in the tractor, particularly as Peter had made him look rather silly on Sally yesterday. They got down the lane without mishap, and their journey was enlivened by the singing of carols by the twins. When they reached the road between Onnybrook and Plowden, Tom drove very carefully round the sharp corner because passing traffic had churned up the snow and there were skid-marks where some heavy vehicle had slid across the road.

"You may have to get out and walk at the steepest part of the hill lower down," Tom yelled above the noise of the engine. "Trolley hasn't got any brakes, and you twins had better stop fooling about."

Mary and Dickie raised an indignant protest and then Peter suddenly shouted to Tom to stop.

"What's that in the ditch, Tom? Just ahead on your left. Looks like a Christmas tree."

And so it was. Peter jumped off the trolley, picked it up and shook the snow from its young green branches. It was about three feet high and the soil was still fresh on its roots.

"Look, Tom," she said. "Parts of the roots have been cut through with an axe. I suppose it dropped off a lorry yesterday before it snowed again."

Tom looked at the marks in the road and nodded.

"Might have been a bit of a mix-up here. Something skidded across the road, anyway. Leave it here, Pete, and we'll pick it up on the way back if nobody has claimed it. Might do for us Christmas Day."

"We saw millions of trees like that in the forest yesterday," Dickie said as Peter clambered on to the trolley again. "Primrose was looking at them, too."

Peter was very quiet on the way down the hill. She was puzzled because Tom's suggestion that the tree had fallen from a skidding lorry didn't make sense. The skid-marks were fresh and the tree had been snowed on where it lay in the ditch and there had been no fall of snow since five in the morning.

Half-way down the hill they met old Charlie pushing up his bicycle. There were no letters for Witchend and only two for Ingles, so Tom put them in his pocket and saved the postman a journey. At the level-crossing the gates were against them, so the twins went on to the platform and watched a heavy goods train clanking south to Hereford.

"Uncle won't let me drive on the main road," Tom explained to Peter, who had climbed up beside him so that she might wave a greeting to the signalman in his box. "I'll turn round at the garage. Wonder how John Gunn is after that crash he had t'other day?"

"I never did like Mrs. Gunn much, but she was very upset and rude to us the other night. The car had been booked for us and we were left stranded. It was lucky that lorry came along... Do you know, Tom, I'm still wondering whether the driver of that lorry was the same man who was driving the glider trailer on the Portway yesterday? Maybe he didn't stop because he recognized me? But suppose he did? There's no reason why he shouldn't say 'Hullo,' is there?"

The train came by before Tom could answer any of these questions, and as soon as the gates opened he drove through without waiting for the twins, who, with Macbeth, pursued him with yells of protest.

He pulled up outside the garage, but could not turn the tractor as a large black car was standing in front of the petrol pump. The driver, in a camel coat and a brown felt hat, was talking to Mrs. Gunn, who looked as miserable as usual.

"Another stranger," Peter said as the twins ran up. "This place is full of them, Tom. Leave the tractor and come over to the post office."

Tom switched off the engine and in the sudden silence they heard what the strange man was saying.

"Don't stand there like a fool, woman. Surely there's somebody here, if you pretend to be a garage, who can fit new chains to my rear wheels at once. I'll pay well, but I'm in a hurry."

"I'm not so sure that he is a stranger, Peter. Didn't Agnes say that the man who wants to rent Witchend for winter sports had a sandy-coloured coat? He looks that sort of chap, doesn't he? How can we find out?"

"Only by interfering, Tom, and I don't want to do that until we've been to the post office. Let's see if there's news for us first and then decide what to do... Come on, twins."

Tom followed them reluctantly. Onnybrook's post office was a little half-timbered house a few yards up a lane on the other side of the main road. Mrs. Grimley had been behind the counter there for as long as Peter could remember. She sold sweets and tobacco and picture post cards and knew everything that was happening in the village.

"I've been expecting you, Petronella," she smiled as they all trooped in. "And how are the twins? Good morning, Tom Ingles. I'm right glad to see you all, for there's a telegram and we didn't know how to get it through to you with all this telephone trouble."

She adjusted her spectacles and produced an orange envelope. "Addressed to Ingles, but any of you could open it, I reckon." Tom nodded and handed it to Peter, who read the message aloud:

"COMING TO-DAY BY RAIL NOT RISKING JOURNEY BY ROAD
PLEASE TELL AGNES ARRIVE C. STRETTON THREE FIFTY
KINDLY ARRANGE TRANSPORT FROM THERE IF POSSIBLE
REGARDS TO ALL LOVE TO TWINS - MORTON."

"Let's go into Stretton on the bus and meet them," Mary pleaded, but before anyone could answer the door was banged open and in walked the man in the camel coat. He was well dressed - too well dressed for the country, Peter thought - with a smooth-shaven, florid face. Although he spoke quietly he was obviously very angry.

"Is there anyone in this God-forsaken place who can tell me where I can get service for my car? That old woman on the corner there, in a place they call a garage, says the nearest place is Stretton. There must be somebody round here who can fit chains to my wheels... What about you, boy? You look as if you might have some sense."

Tom flushed.

"The nearest garage is in Church Stretton, as Mrs. Gunn told you. Her husband would have been able to help you, but he's had an accident, and I expect that's why he isn't there. Stretton is only four miles and the main road is fairly clear."

The man didn't thank them, but looked them up and down curiously. Then, "You kids live round here? Do you know the country well?"

Tom and Peter looked at each other and then the latter said "Good-bye, Mrs. Grimley, and thank you for the telegram. We'll see you again soon... Come on, twins."

At the door they turned to see the man glaring at them as they went out into the snow.

"Nasty piece of work," Tom said grimly. "I'll ask Uncle about him, but I think you're right. There are too many strangers round here. What are you going to do, Peter?"

"Let's do as I said," Mary pleaded. "Let's go into Stretton on the next bus, or we might ask that disgustin' man to give us a lift."

Peter agreed that this was a good idea and Tom promised to go up to Witchend and give the telegram to Agnes.

"You'll be able to hire a car from Stretton up to the end of the lane, and I'll come down with the tractor to pick up the luggage at about five. Or Uncle will come with the Land Rover. Don't worry. I'll fix it."

While he was turning the tractor in the road they saw the man in the camel coat driving off towards Stretton, with a broken chain on one of the rear wheels clattering on the road.

"I don't like him," Dickie said, "but let's not worry about him. Let's go and do our Christmas shopping and meet the others. Have you got enough money to buy us something to eat, Peter?"

He was reassured, and then they began to walk along the road until the bus caught them up. Church Stretton itself looked rather like a Christmas card, for the steep slopes of the Mynd behind the town were covered with snow, and so were the roofs of the houses. The shop windows were gay, and as the twins told Peter that some of their shopping was private she arranged to meet them in the bookshop in an hour's time.

"If we're ready first we'll come and find you," Mary promised. "We'll take Mackie and he can trail you."

Peter was just thinking that a hot drink would be nice when she saw Donald Gibbs, the forester, coming out of the police station. Although he looked grumpy and didn't notice her at first, she called his name and ran after him.

"Hullo, Peter. What are you doing here?"

"Christmas shopping and waiting to meet Mr. and Mrs. Morton and David. They're coming on the three-fifty, which doesn't stop at Onnybrook. What were you doing in the police station?"

"Plenty of trouble, Peter, and now, on top of everything else, my van has broken down and I've half an hour to wait before it's ready."

Peter liked Donald and his wife very much, so she was delighted when he suggested a cup of coffee.

"I know you're fretting and fuming about something," she said as they sat down in the cafe. "Your van won't be ready yet, so you might just as well tell me why you were in the police station. We've been having some odd adventures, too, and we'll swap stories if you like, only hurry because the twins will be looking for me soon."

"No reason why I shouldn't tell you, I suppose, Peter. You know all about us and the news will be out soon. Last night over a hundred young trees were stolen from the forest. We're short-handed through sickness, as I told you, and we haven't enough men to patrol at night and work by day as well. We can't see how the thieves got away because the roads are nearly all under snow... It's moonlight, of course, for a few nights..."

Peter put down her coffee-cup untouched.

"But, Donald, we saw a young tree in the ditch this morning... just past the Ingles turning on the Onnybrook road. And there were skid-marks on the road, too... Do you think-----?"

"Don't know what to think at the moment. The police haven't got many men to spare, but they've promised to look out for unusual-looking lorries, but they can't patrol all the roads to-night."

"But, Donald, couldn't some of us help? There's Tom and me, and David will be here soon, and then there's Mr. Ingles and Mr. Morton, too. Couldn't we keep guard for you somewhere?"

"Sorry, Peter. This isn't a job for children. Ingles might help and we may have to ask some of the farmers round here to give up some time, but you kids must keep out of trouble... Of course, the thieves may not come back again, but there's a week before Christmas, and that's plenty of time to sell Christmas trees in the black market."

Peter flushed with annoyance. There was no need for him to be so rude, even if he was worried. Before she could answer, the door of the cafe burst open and the twins, laden with parcels, and with Macbeth tugging at his lead, surged in.

Gibbs gave them a quick look and got up.

"Sorry, Peter, but you must excuse me. Don't say too much about this, but keep your eyes open... Hullo, you twins. Cheerio."

He put a coin on the cash desk and hurried out, leaving his cup half empty on the table.

Dickie dropped a box of crackers and Mary slipped into the empty seat opposite Peter.

"Now then," she said accusingly. "You were hiding from us, Petah! Yes, you were. You were having a secret with that forester man, whose name we forget... An' why has he gone thumping out like that just as soon as we come?"

"Why?" Dickie echoed triumphantly. "Just tell us why. All right. We'll tell you. He's afraid of us. He knows we find out people's secrets."

Peter didn't say much. She wasn't in the mood to encourage them because she was hurt by Donald Gibbs. There was so much which she could have told him and so much they could do to help, and then Mary dropped another parcel and said, "Why don't you speak, Petah? We heard *him* tell you not to say too much about something, but you're not going to keep a secret from us, are you?"

Mary had a clear and penetrating voice and the other people in the cafe were now obviously amused and curious.

"I don't want to talk about it now, twins, so please don't ask any more questions. Wait till David's here, and then we'll get in Tom, too, and have a meeting to-night. *Please* don't bother me. Shall we have something to eat here?"

Mary realized that she really was in earnest, and as Dickie was never averse to anything to eat, the twins nodded and then picked up the menu.

'Two eggs an' chips and a Coca-Cola is what I would like, please," Dickie said firmly. "I know what I like and I don't really have to look at this thing."

It was snowing lightly again when they came out. Peter had some shopping to do, but they were all three so excited that the time passed slowly until they could reasonably go to the station.

The twins entertained the station staff and offered to decorate the porter's room, while Peter wandered up and down the platform and wished that her heart would stop thumping. Nobody, with the exception, of course, of her father, meant so much to her as the Mortons. From the moment she had first seen Dickie floundering in a bog at the top of the Mynd and then taken the twins and David to Hatchholt, she had realized that perhaps her life had been rather lonely. She had never known Mr. Morton as well as the others, but Mrs. Morton had told her when they first met that she had always wanted two boys and two girls and without saying any more Peter had become accepted almost as part of the family.

As for David, he was different. Just David. Never had much to say and not such a chatterbox as Tom, but when at last a bell rang in the signal-box and the signal went down her heart banged louder than ever, and her cheeks were burning as the twins dashed out on to the platform as the train slid to a stop. The windows were so misted that they couldn't see into the carriages, but suddenly the twins whooped with joy and charged down to the last coach where Mr. Morton was helping his wife on to the platform. An agonized howl behind her gave Peter, suddenly feeling very shy, an excuse to release Mackie from the seat to which he had been tied. When she looked up again all the Mortons were round the guard's van. A lot of luggage seemed to be coming out of the van, and just as she was making up her mind to go and meet them Mary came rushing up the platform.

"Come and look, Petah! Daddy has brought us two sledges and they all want to see you... Come on, Petah. Why are you being so silly?"

Before she could argue she was being hugged and kissed by Mrs. Morton, and by the time the train drew out of the station they were all chattering as if they'd never been parted. A porter and the taxi-driver put the luggage and the two small sledges on to the roof of the big car, and at last Peter found

herself squashed on the back seat between David and his mother, with Mary on her lap. There had been no time or chance to say anything special to David, so she just gave up and sat back, feeling suddenly very warm and happy while the twins chatted about blizzards and wolves and Christmas trees and strange men who wanted to buy Witchend for winter sports.

The sky was clear as dusk fell and they rattled over Onnybrook's level-crossing. Peter told them about old John and his car on their first evening and of how they had got a lift up the hill in the snow, and then that Tom had promised to meet them at the end of the lane with the tractor and trailer. He was there as he had promised, and, to the twins' delight, their father and mother rode on the trailer with most of the luggage while they also took some on their sledges.

Peter found herself walking behind with David.

"Have a good term, Pete?"

"Yes, thanks. What about you?"

"Fine. Nice to be back, though." Then he laughed and added: "I do hope you are feeling well and that the twins have not proved too much for you."

Then she laughed, too, and slipped her hand through his arm.

"We're being silly, David. It's grand to see you all. We've been longing for you to come because we've a lot to tell you. The most exciting and mysterious things have been happening... Let's ask Tom up to supper, and maybe we'll have a chance to tell you everything then. The twins have been up to something, too."

"Time I came," David said. "How's Tom? Seems to be enjoying himself on that tractor."

Peter started to tell him about their day together on the Mynd and at Hatchholt, but then they arrived at the farm and greetings there took another half hour, while Mr. Ingles roared out the news about the stranger in the sandy coat. Mr. Morton, who had flown for the R.A.F., was a quiet man. He

had found Witchend for his family before he went to the war, and it was their most treasured possession, but he had quite a lot to say when he heard of the mysterious visitor.

At last Mrs. Morton said that they must go and see Agnes, and after asking Tom to come to supper with them they went on up the lane with most of the luggage now on the sledges... And when at last they arrived Witchend gave them a wonderful welcome, and Agnes actually blushed at the nice things said to her by Mr. Morton. The old house glowed with warmth and light. There were oil-stoves in the bedrooms - and the oil-stoves attended to by Agnes never smelled - and what Mary called "hotties" in the beds. In the living-room, where the fire never went out, the polished floor, the copper kettles, the oak beams, the hanging oil-lamp and the loaded table brought a catch to Mrs. Morton's throat as she said, "It's so wonderful to be back, Agnes. London seems a million miles away. This is really home to us."

Then they unpacked. The two girls and Tom crowded into the room which David shared with Dickie, while the latter tried to tell his brother about Primrose. At supper they told the grown-ups everything and Peter added what Donald Gibbs had said in Stretton this morning.

"I've never seen him so worried. He said some of the foresters are ill and they haven't enough men to patrol at night when the young trees are being stolen... I think Donald is going to ask Mr. Morton and Mr. Ingles and some of the other farmers to take a turn to help them catch the thieves. Maybe we can do something, too? We don't often go up to the forest, but I can't think of anything meaner than to steal young trees... Anyway, that's what seems to be going on round here, but where Primrose or the man who wants to rent Witchend comes in, I can't imagine."

"I'll have a talk with Ingles to-morrow," Mr. Morton said as he filled his pipe. "If Gibbs really wants us to help no doubt he'll be along."

"I bet Uncle will help," Tom said. "Some of us could go up to see them at the forestry place to-morrow. I'm keen. Count me in. You coming, Peter?"

Peter gasped. This was just like Tom. but before she could express her indignation the twins voiced theirs, making it quite clear that they intended

to be in everything.

Much later, when Dickie and Mary were in bed, Peter and David walked down with Tom to Ingles. The snow was crisp underfoot, and frost sparkled on the hedges as the moon came up.

"I'd like to be doing something to help the foresters to-night," David said as they leaned on the farmyard gate. "Trouble is I can hardly keep awake now. We'll go up there to-morrow and see what we can do. Cheerio, Tom. How's Jenny?"

"O.K., I s'pose... Reckon we're going to ask her over for Christmas... See you after breakfast."

David laughed as, with Peter, he turned back up the lane. They didn't say much now that the story was told, and Peter went up to bed as soon as they got in.

When David woke some hours later the moonlight was streaming into the room. An owl called again and again just as it had done the very first night they had spent at Witchend. He cried again, right over the house, and David slipped out of bed and went to the window.

The larch wood was in shadow, but the moon was bright and, as he looked out, a glider sailed silently over the tree-tops. It swooped with no more sound than that made by a bird, and even the owl was silent as David got back into bed wondering why a lone glider should be up at that time of night.

6. Donald and Peter

About noon next morning four grim-faced men were sitting round a table in the head forester's office in their headquarters at the top of Dark Hollow.

Hardwick, the head forester, was speaking. He was a big man with sandy hair and a freckled face.

"You're sure about this, Donald? At least another hundred, and from the nursery this time? Most of 'em pulled up, I suppose?"

Donald Gibbs puffed at his pipe before replying.

"That's right, Bill. It's a gang, not a few sneak thieves working, and there's someone who knows about the game directing operations. They seem to know where we shan't be! We must either have more help or else we'll have to sleep in the day-time. We can't be on duty twenty-four hours, and I'm not grouching."

"I know that, Donald. It's bad luck that we've got three men down sick. The police are doing what they can. Trouble is that in spite of the snow the nights are fine and light, and I wouldn't mind betting that if we tried to get some sleep now there'd be another raid while we were tucked up in bed."

The third man, Granby the warrener, looked up. "I told you before, Chief, that there are strangers about. Those two kids from Witchend - twins, they are - told me some yarn about following a woman up through the nursery to the top of the Mynd. There's something queer going on round here."

"That's obvious," the fourth man said quietly. "May I suggest, sir, that we look again at the map? The problem would seem to be solved if we can once catch the thieves when they're actually moving the trees away from the district. There are only four roads off the mountain which they can use."

The others looked up in surprise. Michael Burton had only been with them about six months, but, like all the foresters, he was a quiet man who got on with his job without fuss. He was slight and fair and wore steel-rimmed

spectacles and lived alone in a tiny cottage beyond the sawmill. As Granby, who was quick-tempered, flushed with annoyance, Hardwick tried to keep the peace.

"We're all aware of that, Burton, but here's the map, and we may as well go over it again, although we all ought to know our own country. It's obvious that the thieves must have lorries or cars to get the trees away, but three of these roads are all very steep and particularly dangerous in the snow."

He pushed the large-scale map into the centre of the table and pointed with the stem of his pipe to the group of buildings which made up their headquarters.

"Here's the first and most obvious way of getting in or out of the forest," he went on. "The road we use. The road we made right up Dark Hollow down into the Onnybrook road and up across the corner of the forest across the Mynd to the Portway. But there are four of us living and sleeping within two hundred yards of this room. There has always been a man on duty here at night and not one of us has heard a sound of a car or lorry. All agreed?"

The others nodded gloomily as Hardwick stubbed with his pipe-stem again and went on:

"The next way is the steep and narrow road down the western side of the hill from the Gliding Club, and I should think that's just about impassable. Have you tried it, Donald?"

Gibbs shook his head.

"No, and I wouldn't like to. But some of those gliding people *do* use it in winter, although, of course, the easier way for them is up the Carding Mill Valley from Stretton and on to the Portway."

"A lorry *could* manage the steep road the Chief mentioned, Donald," Burton interrupted. "I know it's dangerous, but this gang doesn't mind taking risks. Perhaps the police could be warned to keep a special look-out at the foot of that road?"

Granby nodded grudgingly. This suggestion of Burton's sounded sensible enough, and he wished he had thought of it.

"I suppose there would be tracks in the snow if that's the road they're using," Hardwick said. "Maybe one of us could go up in the van and see, but for all we know some of those gliding maniacs may still be using it... Now see. The third way down is along the Portway to the south and down the steep track at the end of the Mynd to Plowden, but that's not much of a road."

"No, it isn't," Donald admitted. "I've just had a crazy idea, though. Suppose this gang uses sledges? Surely they could load them with trees and launch them down that Plowden track with a fair chance of success?"

Burton didn't think this was a practical idea because loaded sledges of a useful size would be almost impossible to control.

"The fourth road, of course, is down into Stretton from the Portway," he went on. "Those are the only four roads, and if they are properly guarded surely the thieves must be caught? The four of us cannot be everywhere, but it should be possible with the help of the police to patrol those four exits."

"It should be, but it isn't," Hardwick snapped. "The police will do what they can, but they, too, are short-handed. I've no doubt that we've got to ask for volunteers as night guards. What do you all think?"

"I'm sure of it," Gibbs said quickly. "I've had another idea, too. What about posting somebody in the fire-tower? It's fitted with a telephone, and in the moonlight anyone up there could see a lot of the forest... See down some of the rides, anyway, and as soon as he spotted anything suspicious he could ring through here to head-quarters."

Hardwick nodded and turned the map round so that he could mark the position of the fire-tower.

"True enough. A watcher there should be able to see the rides near the nurseries... We must have volunteers. Any suggestions?"

"There's Alf Ingles," Gibbs said. "He's a grand chap. After all, none of the farmers round here can do much on their farms this weather. And we could try Onnybrook."

Before anyone could answer they heard the sound of voices outside and then a vigorous banging on the door.

"Come in," Hardwick shouted, and in walked David, Tom and Peter. The four men stood up and Peter, who was in jodhpurs and looking pretty and determined, smiled at them.

"Good morning, Mr. Hardwick. Hullo, Donald. We hope that we're not being a nuisance, but we know something about your troubles and we've come to volunteer. Tom doesn't know the Mynd as well as David and me, but we're sure there's something we can do... You're not going to be cross with us, are you, Mr. Hardwick? We've come up specially, and I've got my pony, too."

Then she turned to smile at Granby, whom she did not know as well as Hardwick and Gibbs, and introduced the two boys. Burton smiled politely when Peter apologized for not knowing his name, and then Hardwick tried to regain control of the situation.

"This is all very well, Petronella, and I'm sure we're much obliged to you and your friends, but this is no job for youngsters."

Peter turned to Donald for help and detected a flicker of an eyelid, but before he could say anything Tom spoke up.

"Just wanted to say, sir, that my uncle, Mr. Ingles, will be glad to help if you want him. We told him we were coming to see you."

"And I think my father would, too," David said. "We only arrived yesterday, but I expect you know that we really belong up here now. We'll ask him if you like, but I promise you that the three of us here won't let you down. Peter knows the Mynd like we know our back garden, and she's got her pony, too."

Hardwick sat down again and took a deep breath, but Donald spoke first and turned to the two boys.

"Either of you scared of heights? Good. How would you like to spend a night in our fire-watch tower? I expect you've seen it. We were just thinking we could do with a couple of sentries up there these moonlit nights."

"What about *me*?" Peter interrupted. "Why can't I go in the fire-tower?"

"We'll think of something else for you, Peter. You're more familiar with the mountain than any of us," Donald said. Then he turned to Hardwick. "I know these three, Bill, and you know Peter well enough. I think they could help us and the boys might certainly try a night in the tower. And if you'll agree I'd like to go out with Peter now. There's been no fresh fall of snow this morning, and the thieves must have left some tracks. She can ride her pony and get back here quickly if we find anything important."

"A very good scheme, if I may say so," Burton said quickly. "I'll show you boys the fire-tower, but you'll have to prove you can stand heights as Donald warned you. Some people can't. Do you agree, Chief?"

Mr. Hardwick stroked his moustache reflectively. "Very well. And thank you all for offering your help. Petronella can't come to any harm with Donald, and you two boys can try the tower, but you mustn't spend a night up there unless your parents - or your Uncle, Tom - give you permission and let me know... I'll be along in a few minutes. I must telephone the police again."

As soon as they were outside Donald asked Peter to come over first and see his wife and new baby, and by the time they got back to the mess-hut the others were half-way through the meal. Although she had spent so much of her life alone, Peter was much too natural to be shy in the company of men, and she allowed herself to be teased by Granby, who told the others that years ago he had seen Sally drawing a milk-cart in Shrewsbury, and for half an hour it seemed as if they had all forgotten the raids on the forest. David, who was always curious about something new, and eager to learn, kept Hardwick and Burton busy answering questions about forestry, while Tom just enjoyed a good hot meal on a cold day and a holiday from the farm.

Burton, who was quieter than the others and without much sense of humour, seemed to enjoy answering questions about his work, but he was impatient to get them away.

"We'll go back to Witchend if you're not here when we get back," David said to Peter. "Maybe we shall be able to watch you and Donald from the top of the tower... Cheerio!"

Peter watched the two boys go off with mixed feelings. She was very keen on the idea of the tower and had always wanted to climb it and was rather surprised that Donald, after his behaviour yesterday, had wanted her to go with him and not with the others. Five minutes later, when she was up on Sally and he was striding along beside her, she asked him:

"What do you really want to do, and how can I help you, Donald? I s'pose you know you were jolly rude to me yesterday in that cafe? You just left me sitting there with half a cup of coffee looking silly."

"Sorry, Peter. I was too worried and upset to face your twins... I wanted you this afternoon because I'm sure you know the mountains better than any of us, and I want to pick your brains. Lets try and put ourselves in the place of the thieves and see what they'd do. I've worked it out like this. There's no doubt that a determined gang is at work, and it's my guess that there must be at least twelve men on the job. We've got four nurseries, but one of these is no use to the thieves for another few years because the trees aren't big enough to sell. It's not too difficult for a gang of men to root up a hundred or so young trees in the moonlight, but it's not so easy to get them on to lorries and move them out of the district. Of course, we must get as many guards up here as we can, but I want to follow their tracks now and try to trace where they load the trees on lorries. We know they can't bring the lorries right down the rides."

Peter nodded. She was excited and feeling rather important. She knew that the wide tracks between the growing trees used for fire-breaks were called rides, but as the foresters used their trucks up and down these there seemed no reason why a lorry or Land Rover shouldn't do the same. Donald guessed what she was thinking.

"We should hear them in the night, Peter. I'm sure we should. Somehow or other they must be moving the stolen trees by hand to a place where a lorry can pick them up and get them away quickly. I've an idea they're using sledges or trailers, and we ought to be able to follow the tracks in the snow. Come on! "

With a hand on Sally's bridle, Donald led the way up a ride between dense growth of sturdy, maturing trees, then turned to the left up another track which led straight up towards the top of the Mynd.

"Here you are, Peter. I don't suppose you've been here before, but this is one of our nurseries, and they took at least a hundred young trees from here last night. You can see that there are plenty left, so they may come back again for more."

Peter nodded.

"Of course, they only snatched the trees growing nearest to the ride, and you can see that sometimes they used an axe. I can see chips of wood... And look, Donald. There are marks of rubber tyres and plenty of footprints, too."

She slid off Sally and patted the pony as the forester stooped to examine the tell-tale tracks. Then he stood up and looked down the ride.

"It's a rubber-wheeled trolley they've been using, Peter, and by the look of the footprints at least six men have been hauling it. The odd thing is that they must have brought it from the top of the hill and then taken it back the same way. There's no way down. We always come up to this nursery the way I brought you."

"I suppose you're sure of *that*, Donald? The twins say that they followed Primrose Wentworth up the old, over-grown track by Witchend. I haven't tried to find it myself yet, but I'll ask them again, and they can show us the way they came."

Gibbs pointed to the tracks again.

"No doubt of what they did last night, anyway. They came down, loaded up and hauled their trolley up again. You can see that by the marks of the tyres, which are much deeper when the trolley was heavy. You can see how hard the men had to pull, too."

Peter mounted Sally again and they followed the tracks up the ride. They stopped once for Donald to point out the fire-tower nearly a mile away above the tree-tops.

"The boys may be up there now, Peter, From the lookout at the top you can see most of the rides, and if they're using a strong pair of glasses no doubt they can see us now."

Ten minutes later they were up and the footprints and tracks of the trolley were clear in the snow before them. Donald stopped and lit his pipe while Peter stood in her stirrups and looked ahead.

"Now I see where we are, Donald, but it's ages since I came over as far as this. Those people are clever because the top of this particular ride is quite near to the Portway. It's not more than half a mile, I'm sure, and I can see the trail of the truck quite clearly... I bet those men didn't like hauling it over the heather."

Gibbs nodded and then looked round anxiously. The sun had vanished behind a bank of sullen clouds banking up from the west, and the light was fading.

"Weather looks mucky. Are you game to come over as far as the road? I'd like to see where they loaded up, and that would be useful information for the police."

"It's all right for me," Peter laughed. "I'm on Sally. It's no use offering you a ride because you'd weigh her down, Of course I'm ready to go on."

So Donald took Sally's bridle again and they plunged into the snow-smothered heather. Far away to their right they could see the hazy outline of the hangars of the Gliding Club, and even more dimly, almost ahead of them, the ruined cottage.

"I've often meant to ask you about that," Donald said when he saw Peter looking that way. "How long has it been empty?"

"As long as I can remember. It's a horrid place, and there are stories about it that Daddy won't tell me. Some people say it's haunted by the ghost of the old shepherd who lived there. They say he was lost in a blizzard up here and died alone in his cottage soon after. The story says that he was a beastly old man, and everyone round about hated him, and so when he was dying nobody knew about it. I'm not frightened of that sort of thing, but I hate that place, Donald. It's bigger than you'd think. Wildmoor Cottage it's called."

"Very cheerful little story, Peter! Not the sort of place to shelter in if we're caught in a blizzard, eh?"

Peter shivered. "Don't joke about it, please, Donald. Look! There's a glider up."

Sure enough the solitary glider which so many of them had seen was sailing silently above them. Peter waved, but the pilot made no sign.

"Must be cold up there," she said. "If he's got any sense he'll come down before it snows... Come on, Donald. Let's see what happened on the road, and then we'd better get back."

They were within about one hundred and fifty yards of the road when Peter saw a large black car coming towards them along the Portway from the direction of the Gliding Club.

"Look, Donald! It looks like a police car. It's got an aerial on it."

"I expect you're right, Peter. The Chief said they were going to patrol as many of the approaches to the Mynd as they could to-day... He's seen us, surely? He's slowing down... Do you mind if I run ahead and have a word with them on my own? It's just that we all promised Hardwick to keep some of our plans private. Wait here for me and I'll be back as soon as I can. I'd like to tell them what we've found out this afternoon."

"Well!" Peter gasped. "I think you might-----" but Gibbs didn't wait for her to finish and didn't even look back as he trotted towards the black car which had now stopped and was waiting for him.

Peter was very annoyed. Even if Donald had something private to discuss with the police, there was no reason why he should treat her as if she was a child. So she flicked back her plaits and blew on her fingers through her string gloves before turning Sally round and trotting back a few yards the way they had come. She would show him that she wasn't particularly interested in his affairs with the police. She did, however, glance back once over her shoulder, and was just in time to see him standing by the car. Then she made Sally trot so that her hoof-marks made a big figure eight in the clean snow, and didn't look up again until she heard the sound of the car's powerful engine. Suddenly it was roaring south down the Portway in a flurry of snow and a trail of exhaust smoke. But there was no sign of Donald Gibbs. He had vanished. This meant that without even waving to her or taking the trouble to come back he had gone off with his friends the police. She was so angry that the tears stung her eyes. Whatever had happened, he had no right to go off like that and leave her alone on the mountain and feeling so foolish! Then she remembered how rude he had been yesterday in the cafe, and so, feeling humiliated and sorry for herself, she turned her pony back towards the forest. As Mr. Gibbs had decided that he could do without her after she had helped him, there was no object in going as far as the Portway.

And that is where she made her first mistake. She was too angry to think clearly or to see what was happening around her. Without even noticing whether Sally was following the trail of the thieves back to the top of the ride, she gave the pony her head. Suddenly the air was thick with whirling snowflakes as a fresh blizzard swept over the Mynd from the west. She looked up and realized with a sudden stab of fear that she could not see further than five yards. Sky, clouds, the road, the Gliding Station and the forest had vanished in a crazy, silent kaleidoscope of whirling white. She shut her eyes against the dazzle and in a moment of sudden panic realized that she had lost all sense of direction. She reasoned that as long as the snow beat against her back she would be moving east and so must eventually reach the forest. That is, of course, unless the wind changed.

Sally seemed to share the same idea about the wind for she kept her back to it and they seemed to be making some progress when she stumbled in a hollow under the snow. Peter felt herself falling, threw herself clear and tumbled unhurt into the heather. Sally struggled to her legs but Peter realized at once that she was lame. She could walk well enough on three legs but not properly on four, and she whinnied softly as Peter gently felt the swollen foreleg just above the fetlock and then gave her a hug.

"We've been in plenty of scrapes together, darling," she whispered. "Now we've got to help each other. Keep going, Sally, for we'll be in real trouble if we stay still."

It was a comfort to speak aloud and Sally nuzzled at her mistress as if she understood. Peter hoped that she did, for she couldn't help remembering the story of Parson Carr as Agnes had told it to Primrose Wentworth the other night.

Cautiously she led Sally forward with her back to what wind there was and realized that the light was failing. Five minutes later - the longest minutes she had ever known - the trees of the forest loomed up out of the murk. Which way should she turn to find a ride? Left or right? The trees here were growing too close together for a lame pony to pick her way through.

She turned to the right, which she believed was to the south and trudged forward again with Sally at her heels. The snow was not falling so heavily now and the wind had dropped. Suddenly she realized that there were no trees on her left and that she had found a ride into which she turned at once. The trees on the other side were as big as those she had first seen, so she was not on the track used by the thieves when they robbed the nursery.

She was very cold now and it was difficult to keep her courage up for she realized that she was lost and that nobody knew where she was.

And what she hated more than anything else was the silence.

7. Burton the Forester

David and Tom set off cheerfully enough with Burton as soon as Peter and Donald Gibbs had started off on their expedition.

"I'd like to come up here again when we've got this business settled," David said as he fell into step with the forester. "What you and Mr. Hardwick told me just now about growing trees has made me very keen."

Burton didn't seem to have much sense of humour and this rather annoyed Tom who liked what he called a bit of fun. It was obvious though that Burton appreciated David's interest in his special subject, and he said shortly that he was sure Mr. Hardwick wouldn't mind any of them coming into the forest in future if they behaved themselves.

"I can lend you some books if you're keen enough," he went on, "and you can come up when we're planting out the seedlings and see how a forest begins. We grow beech, oak, larch and red maple in some of our nurseries and send them to other forests when they're ready. Those are all in addition to the conifers which are now being stolen... Your friend doesn't seem so interested in trees."

Tom, who was whistling cheerfully as he strode along, looked at the man in surprise.

"You're dead right, guv'nor. I'm not all that keen on forests... Don't know why it is, but by the time I've finished a day on the farm I've had about enough of the country. I'll never get really used to it. I'll tell you what I don't like so much about your forests, mister. Trees are not growing natural stuck along in straight rows like this."

David laughed. "Don't take any notice of him, Mr. Burton. He pretends not to like the country, but everybody knows that he's going to make a jolly good farmer one day. How many trees do you grow to the acre in this forest?"

"About two thousand. When you think of coming up here again let me know. I'd like the job of showing you round... Another ten minutes and we'll be there."

The ride they were walking up now was quite steep and the boys realized that they were approaching the highest part of the forest. Tom went on whistling melodiously until Burton said grimly, "I'll be interested to see whether you've got anything to whistle about when you're halfway up the tower," and this really did stop Tom, for he wasn't sure whether he was going to find the courage to climb up or not.

Soon after this Burton turned out of the ride on to a narrow track between the trees and led the way in single file. Then they arrived at the tower, which stood in a little clearing, surrounded by a wire fence and a gate.

Tom looked up and felt his mouth go dry. The way up to the little box-like cabin, high, high above the tree tops was by a series of thin metal ladders, each of which led to a small platform enclosed with a guard rail. There were four of these platforms, the highest being just below the cabin.

"How high?" David asked as he blew on his hands to warm his fingers.

"I'm not sure. At least sixty feet. Probably eighty," Burton answered. "Are you both game to try the climb? It will be cold, and it's no use having a shot at it if you're going to give in half way up and lose your head and your grip. It's not as easy as it looks, but you can rest on each platform, and I give you my word that the first time is the worst."

"Let's get it over," David grinned. "We can but try, and I'd like to look out over the forest. Who's going first?"

"I am," Burton said. "Take it easy. There are guard rails but you'll find it easier not to use them until you come down. Use the rungs as hand-holds and don't hurry. If either of you can't stick it, just yell out," and he unlocked the steel gate and started to climb.

David glanced at Tom and guessed how he was feeling. "You go next, Tom," he said quietly. "Remember I'll be behind you, and don't look down."

The first ladder wasn't so bad. Burton waited on the platform for them, and if he noticed how white the smaller boy was he only smiled encouragingly.

"If you don't worry it's easy enough, Tom," David whispered as they started on the next ladder, and indeed this advice did help. The ice-cold steel rungs were a foot apart, so it was quite hard going and they were all breathing hard when they crowded on to the second platform and clutched the handrail. They were above the tops of the trees now, and when Tom looked down and saw them swaying gently he felt himself swaying too and closed his eyes.

"Take your time," Burton was saying. "Can you both go on? The knack is to climb steadily, rung by rung, at the same speed. Are you O.K.?"

Tom knew that it was now or never. He felt sure that if he could once reach the top platform heights would never hold the same terrors for him again.

"I'm behind you," came David's steady voice as Burton started up the third ladder, and Tom realized then, perhaps for the first time, why so many people came to rely on David Morton.

They rested a little longer on the third platform, and although on the last stage of the climb Tom's feet felt as heavy as lead and his knees like water, he gritted his teeth and did it. Burton's hand grabbed his and hauled him up as David followed and said, "I'm glad the first time is the worst, Mr. Burton. Tom, in front of me, went up so steadily that I didn't have to do any more than follow him... Now let's see inside the cabin, sir."

Burton unbolted a trap door, pushed it upwards and then climbed in. There was only just room for the three of them inside, but when the flap was lowered into position again and fastened down they were able to look round.

The cabin was about six feet square and as there were windows round all four sides it was very cold. It was certainly not luxuriously furnished, for the only seat was a wooden box. Under one window was a ledge with the telephone and under another a table on a flap. From a hook between two of the windows hung a pair of binoculars which Burton handed to David.

"The site of this watch tower was carefully chosen. You can see the whole of the forest from here. Have a look through the glasses and see whether you can spot your friend and Gibbs. Now look at the map and I'll show you how to pinpoint any position in the forest."

He raised the flap table and the boys then saw that a sketch map was fixed to the top surface. The map itself was ruled in thin red lines and circles rather like the markings on a compass card or latitude and longitude on a map. A wooden pointer was fixed to the table so that it could swivel easily over the map.

"If you were to see anything suspicious at the top of that ridge over there," Burton said as he moved the wooden finger, "All you would have to do is to move this until the tip is pointing directly to where you have seen smoke or indeed any other suspicious incident. Then you take the reading by the number on the map and report it on the telephone. See what I mean?"

The boys nodded and looked out over the snow-covered tree tops. The light was beginning to fade, but it was astonishing how far they could see. Between the trees the rides ran at right angles to each other dividing the forest into squares and rectangles.

"Now I see how dangerous a fire would be," David said. "Have you had many, Mr. Burton?"

"We've been luckier than most because the Long Mynd and this part in particular is a bit off the track. Holiday-makers and careless hikers are the trouble. If I didn't know you two had got some sense I might ask you to prove that you weren't carrying matches."

"But in winter, sir? On a day like this?" Tom said. "Surely there's no danger now?"

"Yes there is. Parts of the forest are full of dry under-growth - dead bracken, brambles and even heather. You'd be surprised how dry it is on the floor of the forest... Now look for Gibbs and the girl on her pony."

The glasses were powerful and although they all three used them there was so sign of anyone moving up the rides.

"The slope of that hill prevents us from seeing the Witchend valley," David said as he swept the glasses round, "and of course we can't see the top of the Mynd either. You'd think we were high enough to see the gliding station."

"Now that you've seen the place we'd better go," Burton said briskly. "I've got plenty of work to do yet and I may have to be up all night again. If you two think you can stick it I'm sure you'll be doing a good job by watching from here. Do you think you could take it on? It'll be lonely and cold. You'll have to wrap up like Eskimos and bring plenty of hot drinks in flasks."

There was a note of challenge in his voice that annoyed Tom, who was still rather ashamed of being scared on the climb up.

"We'll take it on, sir, but we'll have to ask them at home. Will there be somebody at the other end of the telephone all night?"

Burton nodded and lifted the receiver. The boys heard an answering voice and then the forester said, "Burton here, Chief. Speaking from the tower. I've got these two boys up here safely and they say they're game to try a night watch. I'm coming straight back now and maybe you'd like to see them? I'm in favour of this experiment for a night or two... Very well. Good-bye."

David watched him curiously. He seemed to be rather nervous of the head forester, but perhaps this was because he was a comparative newcomer to the organisation.

"The telephone works, you see," he said briefly. "You heard what I said to Mr, Hardwick. He may not be there when we get back but we'll keep in touch with you... Now we'll go down. I'd better go first again and David last, who must pull down the trap-door and bolt it. Use the handrails now and rest on each platform if you must."

Tom wasn't too unhappy going down. He had conquered most of his fears by now although he had one bad moment when, from the third platform, he

looked down on the tree tops as he gripped the handrail. Then David's voice rallied him.

"Wish we could have seen Peter and Donald from the top, Tom. Let's go and meet them. We can easily trail them by Sally's hoof marks in the snow. It will be dark soon so they won't stay up there too long."

"Buck up, you two," Burton called from the next platform. "We can't stay up here all night."

Tom winked at David and whispered, "Can't think why he bothered to bring us."

A few minutes later they had locked the steel gate in the fence and were on their way back to headquarters with Burton striding ahead as if he hadn't a second to spare. The sky was now very threatening with a wind stirring the snow-laden branches of the conifers on each side of the ride. When they reached headquarters Burton, who now seemed impatient to be rid of them, said, "Thanks very much, both of you. I've got to leave you now. Rather an important job on. Both going back to Witchend now? I suppose you'll use the road down Dark Hollow and then cut across?"

David looked at him in surprise.

"I dare say we shall, but we're going to look for Peter first. I'll speak to my father about the tower and if he says 'Yes' we'll be glad to help that way, and I suppose Mr. Hardwick or you will let us know when we're wanted? Did you say that Mr. Hardwick isn't in the office now?"

"He's having a look round. Generally does in the afternoon. One of us will get into touch with you when we want you," and he turned on his heel and hurried away towards his cottage.

"Seems a bit jumpy, doesn't he?" Tom said. "Rum sort of bloke. Doesn't seem to mind if we freeze to death up there in the clouds."

"He's all right," David laughed. "He knows his job. They're all upset about this business, Tom, and I don't blame them. Let's follow Sally's tracks for

half an hour and then if we don't meet Peter and Donald we'd best get back. Looks as if it's going to snow again."

The pony's tracks were easy to follow although the light was fading fast. After a little Tom stopped whistling and said more seriously than usual, "I don't like this business of stealing trees, David. I know what I said about forests up there on the tower, but this is a mean, dirty trick. I'd like to have a share in stopping it. That chap seemed keen for us to watch from the tower so I reckon they think we really could spot something. Wonder how soon they'll want us? And we'll be stuck up there in that tower like two canaries in a cage."

They were in the ride where the young trees had been stolen last night when the blizzard swept down on them and blotted out the skyline, the forest below them and Sally's trail too.

"Stay here for a bit," Tom suggested. "It may blow over and there's no sense in going any higher. I reckon this ride finishes on top of the Mynd. Lucky Gibbs is with Peter. I wonder where they are?"

David wondered too. He felt vaguely uneasy.

"We ought to shelter," he suggested. "I'm sure there are plenty of bigger trees further up on the right. We can't miss our way if we go straight uphill."

But they nearly did, for the snow was so blinding and the light so bad that more than once they blundered into the rough ground from which the thieves, last night, had pulled up the trees. Presently they found the entrance to another ride on their right where the taller trees gave them some shelter.

"We're mugs," Tom grumbled. "Come to think of it you told Peter we'd go straight to Witchend if we got back first. Maybe she's there now wondering what's happened to us."

"Possible, I suppose, but if she is she must have been in a hurry. And what's happened to Donald Gibbs? He was on foot, and the most obvious way back to head-quarters is surely the way we went up. That's this way and we haven't seen him."

"He wouldn't leave Peter in this weather," Tom said. "If she hasn't gone down the Mynd to Plowden on her own then I reckon they're sheltering somewhere together... It's clearing a bit."

They crouched under the shelter of the trees on the western side of the ride and blew on their hands. David was still uneasy. It was not only the blizzard but he felt a curious and unpleasant atmosphere about the forest and he wished he knew where Peter was. Suddenly he stepped forward into the centre of the ride. "Come here, Tom, and listen. I swear I heard the peewit's call... Listen! "

They stood in silence straining their ears and then, from far away and very faintly they heard it again - "Peewit! Peewit!"

"There you are, Tom! Hear it? That's Peter! You shout the call, Tom. You do it better than I do."

Tom put his hands to his mouth and called "Peewit" with all his strength and then David yelled:

"Peter! That you, Peter? Call again."

Faintly came an answering call.

"This way, Tom," David shouted and dashed up the ride. "Keep shouting."

Then suddenly out of the murk came Peter leading her pony.

"Oh, David," she said with a little sob. "How wonderful. Sally's gone lame and I was lost. I knew I ought to keep moving and so, more in a sort of hope and to cheer myself up I tried the peewit's call - and here you are."

For a moment David could not find any words. But Tom did.

"I'm here too, Pete. We were wondering what had happened to you and reckoned you might be back at Witchend by now. Where's Gibbs?"

Peter handed him Sally's bridle before she answered. "We were up on the top not far from the Portway when a black police car came along from the

Gliding Club direction. Donald said that he wanted to speak to them privately which made me mad. I just rode Sally round for a bit and then realized that he'd gone off in the car without even calling me over or saying a word. I was coming back the same way when the blizzard hit me and like a fool I lost my sense of direction, and to tell you the truth I don't know where I am now. I don't much care either now I've found you both - except for Sally, of course."

David looked up. Although it was getting dark the blizzard was dying down and it was possible to see the end of the ride.

"We followed Sally's tracks and we're near the ride where the thieves stole the trees last night. I can't understand about Donald. Did you actually see him get into the car?"

"No I didn't," Peter said shortly. "I can't understand him either, and I never want to speak to him again. It's not his fault if I'm not struggling through drifts all night... I don't think Sally's badly hurt, do you, Tom? She fell in a hole hidden by the snow."

"She's not bad, Peter. I'll take her now and Uncle Alf will have a look at her soon as we get home," and whistling cheerfully he led the way back to the nursery ride.

Peter let him get a few paces ahead and then slipped her hand into the pocket of David's duffle coat.

"I've never been so scared on the mountain before, David... Trust you to be about. Why did you follow me?"

"Don't know really. Wanted to know where you were," and for a few moments neither of them had anything else to say.

It had stopped snowing now and was nearly dark. Their feet made no sound in the thick snow and suddenly Tom stopped Sally and held up a warning hand.

"Shut up!" he hissed over his shoulder. "There's somebody down there. I swear I saw the flash of a torch. There! See?"

Sure enough, about a hundred yards ahead where the nursery of young trees began there came a gleam of light as if the beam of a torch was being flashed on the ground.

"We're having quite a day," Tom whispered. "I reckon we've run into trouble now. If they turn round they'll see us. Maybe the gang is getting to work again?"

"Get behind Sally and don't move," David breathed. "I don't think it's the gang, unless they're pulling more trees up now and are coming to collect them later. We never thought of that one, did we?"

They strained their eyes through the gloom but could not see anybody although the flash of the torch came again from further away. Then Sally shook her head and her bridle jingled but that was the only sound to break the silence.

Then David whispered again:

"I think we're just about where the ride up from headquarters joins this one and I believe the owner of the torch has gone down into the forest. Let's go ahead carefully and see if there are any fresh footprints in the snow."

Peter sighed. She had had enough adventures for one day and wanted nothing so much as the comfort of Witchend.

"Was it a man or a woman, Tom? If it's a man it might be one of the foresters, and if it's a woman it might be that crazy Primrose. She seems to be spending a holiday up here."

Tom didn't know, but as both boys seemed to be sure that the stranger was something to do with the gang and that this was their chance to help the foresters Peter said no more.

About eighty yards down the track their ride was joined on the left by another, running downhill towards headquarters. There were fresh footprints leading out of this ride, into the one in which they were standing and then away downhill to where the nursery was bounded by a line of bushes.

"We came up that track through the trees," Peter whispered. "And I s'pose that's the way you followed me? Why has this chap gone off down there?"

"Let's find out," David replied. "Take Sally now, Peter, while Tom and I go ahead and explore. Stay here till we come back."

"Mind you do come back. Don't go off in a police car!" Peter said feelingly.

There was no need for the boys to hide because if anybody was on guard in the shadows they would already have been seen. Peter watched them following the footprints down the hill until the shadows of the undergrowth swallowed them up. She waited and watched and in a few minutes Tom came running back.

"We've found something, Pete. Behind those bushes there's quite a wide track - sort of continuation of this ride. If we hadn't had that chap's footsteps to follow, though, we'd never have found it. Come on. David's gone ahead because we thought we saw the torch again."

"This must be the hidden track the twins found, Tom? They followed Primrose up this and it leads down to Witchend. I don't care who it is in front now because we're on the way home."

She hurried on through the snow which now showed two sets of footprints. The track, running sharply downhill, was arched with trees and very dark. Peter stumbled once or twice and, at a corner where the banks were five or six feet high she bumped into David.

"Steady, Peter," he whispered. "You're breathing down my neck. He's not far ahead now, but I don't know who he is. He's a little man but he doesn't seem to be doing anything suspicious. More often than not he shines his torch on the ground."

"Maybe he's looking for tracks in the snow, too," she suggested.

"I want to know who this chap is and where he's going," David said stubbornly as he went forward again. "Don't you think he's sinister, Peter? I do."

"Not really. Although I'm tired I'm still curious."

At the next corner, while they were waiting for the mysterious stranger to get further ahead, Tom and Sally caught them up.

"Moon's up," he whispered. "It's going to be another good night for the gang."

David led them forward again and at the next corner they saw the lights of Witchend below them on the left. As they came out of the shadow of the trees Peter stopped and pointed to the ground. "Look at these. They're the tracks of rubber tyres. I suppose it was too dark to see them under the trees... David! I'm sure they're the same as those I saw with Donald on the ride where the little trees were stolen."

Tom interrupted before David could answer.

"Just a sec. You can see that chap now. He's almost opposite Witchend. We've got to find out what he's doing down here."

Peter was rather annoyed because neither of the boys seemed excited about her discovery of the wheel tracks, but in the moonlight she now saw something unexpected. Just opposite Witchend's gate where the path led up the side of the larch wood, the hillside, between the lane and where the trees began, was smooth and steep. At the top of this slope she could see what looked like two black beetles. Then they began to move. Then they were hurtling down the steep slope towards the stranger on the path below.

"It's the twins," Peter shouted. "They're racing on their sledges. They'll hit him."

At the sound of Peter's voice the man stopped and turned. Then the silence was broken again by screams and yells of warning from Dickie and Mary as they rushed headlong down towards the unsuspecting stranger.

He turned too late. One toboggan overturned in a cloud of snow while the other whizzed on like a rocket and hit him as he tried to dodge it. Two sledges, the twins, a barking dog and a strange man were mixed up together in the snow! Tom let go of Sally and dashed forward, and Peter and David followed, leaving the pony to look after herself. Tom was a good runner and was the first on the scene. The twins picked themselves up, laughed at each other, and then looked at their victim, who was sitting up rubbing his head with one hand, and clearing the snow from his collar with the other.

Tom gave him one glance and turned to meet the other two.

"Fine lot of fools we are!" he gasped as they dashed up. "We've been following Mr. Burton," and before any of them could answer him Witchend's door opened and Mr. Morton came out just as the twins went into action.

"We don't know who you are," Mary said in her clear little voice, "but we're sure you're very, very dangerous. You might have hurt us very badly appearin' suddenly like that... You ought to have a bell to ring or red lights on or something warning... Are you all right, twin, in spite of this dangerous man? I s'pose you know that my twin saved your life when he tried to stop?"

Burton, looking slightly dazed, continued to remove snow from his neck.

He spat some snow from his mouth and rather unsteadily got to his feet as Mr. Morton arrived.

"What's going on here?" he said. "Glad to see Peter and you, David. You've been out a long time." Then, to Burton, "I hope these two rascals of mine haven't hurt you."

Then David stepped forward and introduced the two men.

"Mr. Burton took us up the fire tower this afternoon and Mr. Hardwick wants some of us to volunteer as guards at night, to guard the young Christmas trees which are being stolen from the nurseries. He wants Tom and me to watch in the fire tower."

Burton smiled ruefully and shook hands with Mr. Morton. "I've come to no harm, thanks, although I may be suffering from shock. It's as your son says, Mr. Morton. I came down to see whether you and perhaps Mr. Ingles could spare some time to help us."

Mr. Morton looked puzzled.

"I've heard something about your troubles, but you'd better come in and talk it over. Indeed, you'd better all come in - specially you twins."

Peter explained that Sally was lame and that she wanted Mr. Ingles to see her at once and so, after some discussion, Burton said he would walk down the lane to the farm with the others and call at Witchend on the way back.

"And I'll walk down with Peter and Tom, Dad," David said. "We won't be long."

So reluctantly the twins dragged their sledges with lagging feet towards the house, muttering to themselves that they were being kept out of things, while their father closed the gate.

Peter took Sally again as Burton, quite sharply, spoke to the two boys.

"What on earth are you two supposed to be doing? I thought you'd gone straight back to Witchend?"

"We didn't," David replied. "I told you we were going to meet Peter and it's just as well we did. She was lost in that blizzard on the top of the Mynd after your friend Mr. Gibbs went off in a police car."

Burton stopped.

"What are you talking about? What police car?"

Peter told him. She had not forgiven Donald and she didn't spare him.

"He went off without a word and left me," she went on. "If it hadn't been for David and Tom anything might have happened to me. I expect you'll see him before I do, so perhaps you'll tell him something. I'm sure he'll be interested to know this. When I went up the ride through the nursery with him this afternoon we saw tracks in the snow of rubber-tyred wheels. We thought they were made by a trolley which the thieves are using to take the Christmas trees away. We've just seen the same tracks about a hundred yards back just where the path comes out of the wood. Did you see them?"

"Were you three behind me, then?"

David laughed. "Yes, we were. And suspicious of you too. We were just coming down the ride when we saw your torch and we thought we'd better trail you. But you see what Peter means about those wheel tracks, don't you, Mr. Burton?"

"I do indeed. You're all very smart, aren't you? Did you actually see the police in that car on the Portway, Peter?"

"No, I s'pose I didn't. I wasn't near enough and the light was bad. But it was a black car with radio and I'm sure Donald - Mr. Gibbs, I mean - saw policemen in it. He said he wanted to talk to them privately."

"No doubt he'll have some important news for us by now, then. I think I'll get back as soon as I can and come and see Mr. Ingles and Mr. Morton another time. We'll get in touch to-morrow, and so will you please explain why I feel I should go back at once... And let us know to-morrow whether you two chaps will do a night turn in the fire tower. That would be a real help... Good night all."

8. Wildmoor Cottage

As Donald Gibbs hurried across the snow towards the big black car which pulled up on the Portway, he realized that he had just been rather abrupt with Peter, whom he liked and admired very much.

He had told her the truth when he said that he wanted to use her knowledge of the Mynd. She had lived all her life on the mountain and except when she was at school she spent most of her time on it. He knew too, although he hadn't told her, that Mr. Hardwick was annoyed with the police because they were not doing more to help the foresters, and their sudden appearance in the car obviously meant that they were really making some effort to patrol the roads. Donald was fairly sure, too, that there was likely to be trouble on the Long Mynd before the thieves were caught, and it was obvious that the police would not want to say much in front of a schoolgirl, but this did seem to be a good opportunity to tell them about the tyre tracks Peter and he had just seen on the nursery ride.

The windows of the big car were closed and misted over, but when he was within a few yards the rear door opened and a man in a belted coat and a soft hat stepped out into the snow.

"Afternoon," he smiled. "You're one of the foresters, aren't you? Good. We were hoping to see one of you chaps and were coming down to your headquarters presently. Come inside out of the cold and have a look at our map. We're a bit puzzled about one of the tracks shown on the west side of the hill."

He held the door open and Gibbs stepped forward and put one foot inside the car. In that second he sensed that something was wrong but was too late to save himself. The man behind him pushed him in the back and as he stumbled forward into the gloom of the big car something struck him violently on the head. He tried to cry out but there was nothing but a roaring in his ears and flashing lights before his eyes. He was falling, falling into a horrible darkness - and that was all.

Slowly, slowly he climbed out of the black pit of pain as consciousness returned. His head throbbed like the pulse in an aching tooth, only a thousand times worse. He could actually hear the throbbing like the engine of a tractor. As he moved his head the pain brought back memory and he groaned through clenched teeth as he remembered how easily he had been fooled.

He drew a deep breath and with it a cold, musty smell mingled with the scent of burning tobacco. He was bitterly cold and his wrists and ankles were bound. When his eyes got used to the subdued light he realized that he must be lying on a heap of musty straw in an unfurnished room.

Suddenly the throbbing stopped and he heard the murmur of distant voices. Then he closed his eyes again and tried to relax and gain strength. He clenched his teeth to stop them chattering. He fought back another wave of faintness and then, with a terrific effort he rolled over and struggled to his knees. The rope with which he was bound cut into his ankles and wrists and the pain in his head throbbed up again.

There was just enough light coming through the gaps between the boards covering what once had been a window for him to see where he was. The room was obviously on the upper floor of a partially ruined house and the light was moonlight. Except for the pile of straw the place was bare. The murmur of voices went on and seemed to come from below. He shuffled round on his knees and saw a gleam of yellow light from the floor in a corner of his prison and guessed that there must be a hole in the floor boards.

The corner was not more than six feet away, but it took him several minutes to get there because he realized that he must not make a noise. He tried first to shuffle along on his knees and then, afraid that he might topple forward, he lay down again and wriggled inch by inch towards the hole. It was about five inches across and luckily was not right in the corner. By lying on his side he was able to listen more easily than he could look, so after he had seen all he could he settled down with his ear to the hole. All that was visible of the room below was an old-fashioned iron stove and the legs of two men sitting on the floor on each side of it. While he watched another man moved in front of the stove, but Donald could only see part of him and

not his face. This man was well-dressed in a short leather coat, breeches and high leather boots. It was difficult to tell how many men were in the room, but he guessed that there must be at least six.

As he could see no more he moved his head and put his ear to the hole and was just in time to hear what must be the opening and closing of a door. In the silence that followed he heard a new voice say, "She's up again, boss. Easy launch. Thinks she can stay up for an hour. Have you made contact yet?"

Then, in a flash, Donald realized where he was and what was happening. He was a prisoner in Wildmoor Cottage which was being used by the thieves as a base. Easy launch meant that the gang were using a glider and the throbbing noise he had heard was the engine of the winch winding up the cable and hauling the glider into the air. Then he remembered that Peter and he had seen a red-winged glider almost as soon as they had come out of the forest to the top of the mountain. But why should the gang use a glider, the sailing of which must be both difficult and dangerous in the dark in winter? And was there any connection between the glider they had seen and the sudden appearance of the car on the Portway?

Then he found the answer to both questions. The men in the room below were suddenly quiet, so that he could hear one voice distinctly. Somehow he knew that this voice belonged to the man in the leather coat who was their leader.

"Are you all right up there? Good. Is there enough moonlight for you to see the rides? Good. Can you get up enough to see the Plowden road? Tell me what you can see."

A long silence as Donald's mouth went dry with excitement. There was no doubt now. They were using "walkie-talkie" radio and the pilot of the glider was the eyes of the gang. No wonder they could strike quickly. No wonder their lorries could dodge the police.

The boss was speaking again, this time to the men around him.

"She says there's no sign of anything moving in the forest, but the moon will be down in two hours and she can't guarantee to stay up much longer... First four of you get moving at the top end and work quickly. There aren't so many of the foresters available now, and if there's only one of them guarding the top nursery you should be able to deal with him. And don't be too polite either as we pack up for good to-morrow night. If he's misguided enough to show fight, tie him up and gag him and then put him on the trolley and cover him with trees... If you get real trouble two of you had better stay behind to deal with whoever has found you and the others clear out with the truck. Whatever happens, don't give away the short route we're using down to Ingles. All clear?"

A murmur of voices followed, then a shuffling of feet and clink of metal. Then the boss spoke again.

"George knows where to drop you. You'll all hear from me to-morrow but lie low until you get your orders. Get moving quickly now and you'll see me later when we've got the glider down... And keep quiet about our visitor upstairs. I'll look after him and we hope that he'll have at least one companion with him to-morrow."

And then silence as Donald, feeling sick with the bitter cold and the pain in his throbbing head, rolled away from the hole. He was shivering violently and was sure that if there was still anybody in the room below they could hear his teeth chattering. He saw, too, how dull the foresters had been not to discover that the thieves had been moving the trees on some sort of a truck down the old track past Witchend and Ingles to the main road. Peter had said something about the Morton twins finding this track but he had no idea that it existed.

For a few minutes he struggled to loosen the ropes round his wrists, but he was too weak and the knots too strong for him to make any impression on them. All that he managed to do was to break the skin.

Then he heard footsteps below and the opening and closing of a door and guessed that for the first time he was alone in the cottage. He must then have dozed for a few minutes and was roused by a curious whistling noise

above the house. This was followed by the throbbing of the engine he had heard earlier and he guessed that the glider was down again.

For what seemed like hours but can only have been minutes, he watched the bars of moonlight on the wall of his prison. They moved as the moon moved and soon, he realized, he would be in complete darkness until the dawn. The cold was intense and his body shivered uncontrollably. Although his head still ached, what hurt most was the knowledge that he had been so easily duped. Then it occurred to him that the glider pilot had seen the two of them crossing the Mynd and reported by radio to the car, which might have been anywhere in the district. It was all so easy if the weather was suitable for the glider to get up, for everyone was used to seeing gliders over the Mynd.

He groaned again at the thought that the thieves were again at work. He tried to remember all that Peter had told him about the discovery of an uprooted tree in the ditch on the main road, and of the lift given to her and the Morton twins on the night of their arrival.

It was darker now and he must have been dozing when he was roused by the sound of voices in the room below him. He heard someone poking the stove and the sound of metal clinking and then again the smell of cigarette smoke. He was too cold and weak to roll over to the hole in the floor and to his horror realized that there was not much fight in him. Then suddenly he heard the sound of a step, the crunch of breaking wood and a man cursing.

"That's another of the rotten stairs gone," he heard distinctly, and then the more cultured voice of the leader saying:

"Give me the light. I'll go first."

Gibbs made a desperate effort and struggled to his knees in the straw as heavy steps came upstairs. Then with the scraping of a bolt the door was opened. The flood of yellow light from an oil lantern dazzled him and he closed his eyes. When he looked up he saw that the bigger of the two men, who was holding the hurricane lamp, was dressed in a leather coat with a big sheepskin collar and long boots, and was obviously the man he had seen through the hole in the floor standing by the stove giving orders. He was

looking down at him quizzically and with rather a shock Donald saw that he was good-looking and well groomed. The other man, who was carrying a steaming bowl, was a very different type and looked as if he'd been born to obey orders.

Donald felt suddenly giddy and swayed sideways. The big man stepped forward and hauled him back against the wall so that he could sit upright,

"Don't trouble to abuse me, Mr. Gibbs," he said quietly. "Although there is no need for you to know my name I have taken the liberty of acquainting myself with yours. I borrowed your wallet when you were - er, *resting*, shall we say? Here it is. Waiting for you when you are able to use your hands again."

He threw the wallet into the straw and then turned to the man behind him.

"Put that bowl on the floor and fetch me three blankets. And if there's any hot water in that kettle on the stove bring some in a bowl or in the biggest mug we've got."

Donald croaked something abusive as the man came nearer to him and held the lantern high.

"Please listen to me," he went on quietly. "You won't do yourself any good by shouting or making a fuss, and it's no use struggling because the man who tied these knots is an expert... Please keep still while I examine this bump on the back of your head... Dear me, Mr. Gibbs. What have you been doing?"

"Keep your hands off me," Donald roared as he struggled again with the cords at his ankles and wrists. "You'll be sorry for this when you're caught. They're after you now."

The man stepped back and regarded him sadly.

"You'll feel better if you don't work yourself into a passion, Mr. Gibbs. I would like you to understand now that I regret that bump on your head very much. Please accept my apologies, but under the present difficult

circumstances it was necessary. When my man comes up with some hot water I'll attend to it and I do hope, most sincerely, that when it is cleaned up you will be in less pain. I am extremely sorry, but I am forced to detain you in these rather squalid surroundings for not more than forty-eight hours.

"To-morrow I hope to give you some congenial company. One of your fellow-foresters, to be precise, and I hope that he will give us as little trouble as you did... Ah! Here is Henry... If you keep still, Mr. Gibbs, I should like to put these blankets round you. I fear you are very cold. I really am sorry but we have so few amenities here."

Gibbs gave up. Exhausting his strength in a hopeless struggle with two men was ridiculous, and he now believed that the boss had no wish to do more than keep him a prisoner.

Henry put down two large mugs of hot water and handed over three blankets.

"Just examine the knots, Henry, and then tuck our friend up as cosily as possible. Have you a handkerchief, Mr. Gibbs?"

"Side pocket," Donald grunted and then, as he realized the humour of the situation, tried a smile.

The big man then lifted the lantern and carefully examined his head. Then, as soon as Henry had tested the knots of the cords with which he was bound and wrapped him in the blankets, he took Donald's handkerchief and gently bathed the back of his bruised and aching head.

"You'll not be much worse in the morning, Gibbs. The bruise is quite clean now, but I'll bind the handkerchief round it."

Donald found himself grunting his thanks. It was certainly a very odd situation!

Then they fed him with hot soup and chunks of bread and he felt much better. Henry was sent for a second bowl and Donald heard the sound of voices downstairs, but not what was said. The other stranger was obviously

the pilot. With the second bowl of soup came some corned beef. He chewed this ravenously as it was fed to him by Henry and felt his strength returning.

"Take my advice," the leader said. "Don't try to escape. It is waste of your time to work on the knots. It may be some hours before we come to see you again and I'm afraid that the time may drag for you..."

At that moment Donald heard the sound of an approaching car. From below came a muffled shout which sounded like, "Car coming. Lights out."

Donald took a deep breath as Henry blew out the hurricane lamp. Then, as the car came nearer, he shouted with all his strength:

"Help! Help! I'm a prisoner in the cottage. HELP!"

Before he could shout another word the two men were on him. The big man struck him across the mouth so that his bruised head crashed against the wall and then, snatching the handkerchief from his head, he gagged him savagely while Henry drew the ends taut and knotted them.

9. Night Adventure

Peter, with her hand on Sally's bridle and with David and Tom beside her, stood in the Ingles lane in the moonlight and watched Mr. Burton trudging back towards Witchend.

"He's a rum sort of chap," David said. "Fancy coming all this way to see Dad and Mr. Ingles and then not being able to spare another ten minutes to do so. I should have thought he'd have been more excited about those tracks of the rubber wheels we've just seen in the snow than anything else. What really shook him was your news about Gibbs going off with the police, Peter."

"It shook me too," Peter said indignantly. "I wonder whether he's wild because Donald - Mr. Gibbs, I mean - went off like that by himself without telling any of the other foresters? Anyway, I'm tired and cold and I do want Mr. Ingles to look at Sally's leg."

"Sorry, Peter," David said. "Of course you're tired. I just want to see whether Burton is going into Witchend or not... No, he isn't. He's going straight past the gate. I wonder whether he'll stop to look at those tracks?"

"He's too far off for us to see anyway." Tom shrugged. "Let's go."

Five minutes later David and Peter were in the Ingles kitchen while Tom took Sally round to the stables. Peter went out with Mr. Ingles while David explained to Mrs. Ingles that Peter and he must go back to Witchend for a meal as soon as possible.

"Have you had any more curious visitors to-day?" he went on. "We came down with one of the foresters who wanted to ask Mr. Ingles to volunteer to help guard the forest from Christmas tree thieves. He's rushed back now but he'll be down again to-morrow."

Mrs. Ingles began to lay the table.

"Nobody has been and none likely in this weather, David. Mr. Ingles was fighting mad with that lah-di-da chap yesterday... Peter looks tired, David. What have you all been doing today? Seems to me you're very late."

David was saved from answering that awkward question by the return of Tom, who came in stamping his feet and blowing on his hands.

"Hullo, Aunt Betty. I'm cold and starving as usual. Don't know how it is, David, but I can hardly ever get enough to eat in this house... Nothing much wrong with Sally, Uncle says. He's fussing over her with Pete and binding up that sprain. Says she might have been badly lamed if Peter had ridden her... Thoughtful girl, that!"

He spoke without the flicker of a smile, and although David opened his mouth to make a sharp reply to his last remark, he realized in time that Tom was pulling his leg. A few minutes later Peter came back with Mr. Ingles and confirmed the news about the pony.

"We mustn't stay, thank you, Mrs. Ingles. We haven't been in to Witchend yet, and Agnes will be annoyed if we keep supper waiting." Then she turned to the farmer and thanked him again for looking after Sally. "We'll see you in the morning," she went on. "Thanks for rescuing me, Tom, and will you remind Mr. Ingles about volunteering as a forest guard before Mr. Burton or one of the others turn up in the morning."

"How much are we going to tell the grown-ups, David?" Peter said. "P'raps we'd better not say too much about me being lost in the blizzard. It was just bad luck really. Of course, if they *ask* we'll tell them, but what I mean is, are they to know about *everything* that's happened?"

David nodded. "Dad will volunteer, of course, and then I suppose the foresters will tell him what they know and all about the old track we came down to-night. It's odd that we never really explored that before, Pete... I think we'd better tell them the whole story. There'll be an uproar from the twins, of course, because they haven't been asked to do anything special, but we can get over that. They were really rather bright over following that woman Primrose up that path to the top. Where does she fit in to all this, Pete?"

Peter yawned. "I'm so tired, David, that I can hardly think. I've got some ideas about Primrose, but let's talk about it all to-morrow."

At Witchend, when they were sitting round the table, David encouraged the twins to tell them about their adventures on their sledges. Dickie was not to be fooled by this.

"We'll tell you the things we've done and the places we've been, David, but what everybody here wants to know most is what you and Peter have been doing."

"And Thomas, too," Mary put in. "Thomas doesn't like us and we'd just like you all to know that to-day we've been utterly deserted by you three and what's more we've been jolly thankful. We wouldn't have been able to do the things we've done with Eskimos and discovering South Poles and trekkin' for hundreds of miles over trackless, icy wastes with you three interferin' all the time. Isn't that right, twin?"

Richard nodded but didn't speak because his mouth was full of hot sausage.

So David told them of their visit to the forestry headquarters and of how worried the foresters were because they had not enough men to guard the nurseries of young trees. He would rather have told his father alone because, as he had feared, his mother was quick to see the implications of his story.

"I can see what all this is leading up to and I'm going to say my piece now. We came up here for a holiday and to spend Christmas in a place we love. The twins have been ill and need a little extra care for a week or two - and don't look so smug, you two! I'm sorry for the foresters and I hope the thieves are caught quickly, but really all this is nothing to do with us and I *do* hope that you're not all going to get mixed up in it."

Mrs. Morton went rather pink as she finished speaking and her husband cleared his throat to break an awkward silence. For the rest of the meal they talked about Christmas presents and letters to be written, and Peter told them that her father was safely at Seven Gates and that she was sure they

would all be welcome there for at least one day of the holiday if the snow was no worse.

Eventually the twins went off to bed and when their mother came downstairs again Mr. Morton pulled chairs for them all round the fire and said, "Now that those two are out of the way, we'd better talk this business over again. David and Peter seem to know more about it than any of us, and if it is true that we are going to be asked to help the foresters we'd better make up our minds before the morning. I'll go down and see Alf Ingles after breakfast, but what happened to that chap the twins knocked over? He said he was a forester, didn't he?"

"He is a forester," David explained. "His name is Burton, and although he's only been up there about six months, he's very keen. He took Tom and me up the fire tower this afternoon, and I may as well tell you now, Dad, that they would like us to spend a night up there watching for the thieves. Mr. Burton was keen on some of us doing that and said it would be a great help. He dashed back to headquarters just now because Peter found some tracks in the snow, which we think prove that the thieves are bringing the stolen trees in hand-trucks right down past this house."

"There was another thing, too, Mr. Morton," Peter said. "I was out in the forest this afternoon with Donald Gibbs. He's the deputy to Mr. Hardwick and he went off suddenly in a police car on the Portway. We told Mr. Burton and that was another reason why he wanted to hurry back. I suppose he thought that something must be happening that he didn't know about. But that's why he didn't come back and ask you to-night."

Mrs. Morton looked up from her knitting.

"Then we'd all better wait until tomorrow, hadn't we?"

"We can wait until some more trees are stolen, of course, Mum," David said. "Three of the foresters are ill and that only leaves three and Mr. Hardwick to guard the forest. None of them is having enough sleep and the police don't seem to be able to do more than just patrol the roads... Of course, the risks to the thieves may now be so great that they won't come again. They must know that somebody is on their trail now, but I think we

all ought to help the foresters, if we can. I know you really think so too, Dad, and Mr. Ingles will do anything to help. Tom and Peter and I want to help too, if we can. We went up there to-day and offered to help them, but of course I told Burton and Mr. Hardwick that we must have your permission."

"I suppose there's no reason why some of you shouldn't go up that tower if the foresters want you to do so," Mrs. Morton smiled rather grudgingly.

"You'd be out of trouble there, I hope. And what about Peter? We're responsible for her and I really don't think she ought to be mixed up with these thieves and the police."

Peter leaned across and put her hand over Mrs. Morton's.

"Please don't worry about me. You wouldn't really want me to stay at home and look after the twins while the others are helping, would you?"

Mrs. Morton looked at her affectionately. "No, darling, I suppose I wouldn't, but I did just want to have a happy, domestic sort of Christmas."

Her husband laughed. "So you will, my dear. The thieves haven't much time left. There are only five days to Christmas, and they'll have no time to market the stolen trees after to-morrow. I shouldn't think they would, anyway. What do you think about all this, Agnes? You haven't had much to say."

Agnes looked at them all over the tops of her spectacles.

"Folk round here don't hold much with these foresters. We never asked them to come here. They may be pleasant enough but they don't belong. Don't often see them in Onnybrook, and there's plenty round here says they've spoiled the Mynd. All the same," she added grudgingly, "it's all wrong to come stealing the young trees. 'Tis my idea that Primrose Wentworth woman has got something to do with all this. She was a bad lot."

Peter laughed and got up.

"I think so too, Agnes. We'll find her out soon. I know lots of people round here don't like the foresters but that isn't fair."

"Quite right, Peter," Mr. Morton said. "We can't do anything to-night because the foresters haven't told us what they'd like us to do... You'd better go to bed, Peter. You can't stop yawning."

"I could sleep for twelve hours," she admitted as she kissed Mrs. Morton. "Good night all."

The bedroom was warm, for Agnes had left the little oil stove burning after Mary had gone to bed. Peter went to the window before she undressed and opened it wide. It was very cold and the moon was up. She looked up into the star-spangled sky across which a few clouds were drifting, and thought of the glider. There was surely enough wind for a skilled pilot to keep a glider airborne and enough light for him to see to land? She yawned again, closed the window all but two inches and went over to Mary's bed. In her sleep she looked like a cherub on an old-fashioned Christmas card and Peter smiled to herself because she knew how easy it was to be fooled by the twins - and not only by their innocent appearance.

Just before she dropped off she remembered how she had felt when leading lamed Sally across the Mynd in the blizzard without knowing where she was, and again of the shock of hearing her peewit's cry - the secret signal of the Lone Piners - repeated as she stumbled down the ride in the blinding snow. She remembered that she had thought it an echo or imagination because it was what she wanted to hear, and then the reality was actually David running towards her. She sighed happily as she remembered how lucky she had been to-day. Dimly she heard the others coming up to bed and then she slept.

She did not dream. She was wakened by something tickling her face, a hand on her mouth and a whisper in her ear.

"Peter! Peter - please, *please* wake up and don't make a noise."

Mary was leaning over her, shaking her now and flashing the torch, which she kept under her pillow, in her face.

"Peter! You're awake now, aren't you? Listen, Peter. I think something exciting is going to happen. I know Dickie is awake too. Sometimes this happens to us and then we know that the other twin is awake too."

Peter sat up in bed and reached for her jersey. She was suddenly wide awake too.

"Listen," Mary whispered through chattering teeth. "I can hear somebody outside. It's Dickie. I know it is." She ran over to the door as Peter slipped out of bed and put on her dressing gown. Slowly the door opened and Dickie's tousled head appeared.

"Goodo," he whispered. "I thought you'd wake up too. David's here. We're coming in and we've got Mackie."

"Light a candle, Peter," David whispered as he gently closed the door behind them. "Sorry about all this but I've got some news. You two kids wrap yourselves in that eiderdown and keep the dog quiet. We dare not wake the others."

"It's nearly two o'clock," he whispered. "I don't know what woke me but I must have heard something that got me out of bed. I was out almost in my sleep and at the window almost before I realized I was awake. I couldn't have made much noise but anyway Dickie woke too and so did Mackie who was illegally on the end of his bed..."

Anyway, this is it, Pete. I know for certain what makes those wheel tracks now. There's practically no moonlight but I saw four, or it may have been six men, hauling a big trolley right down past our gate. They've come down that old road all right and we've got our chance now to find out where they unload the trees. I'm going to follow them. Are you coming too or shall I try and wake Tom? We've got to find out where these crooks load up the trees and now's our chance. Get on something really warm and buck up."

"What about us-----" Mary began before Peter could answer.

"We dare not take you, twins," David whispered. "Do have some sense, Mary. Dickie says you'll keep guard here, because if you go out at this time

you might start coughing and give the game away. You'll be much more help to the Lone Pine Club if you stay here on guard... O.K., Mary?"

His sister, after a glance at her twin huddled up next to her under the eiderdown, nodded.

"Very well, David. We'll keep guard. Trust us, but s'pose you're not back to breakfast?"

"We shall be," David said as he got off the bed. "Buck up, Peter, if you're coming, or would you rather go back to bed?"

"Much rather," she said grimly. "Much, much rather, but I'm coming with you and I'll be downstairs in about three minutes."

She was as good as her word and found David waiting by the door with her rubber boots ready for her.

"Good girl," he whispered. "I've got a torch but we've got to be careful not to give ourselves away. I've just thought that perhaps more than one trolley uses the old road, and I wouldn't care to be caught between the first crowd coming back and another lot coming down... Come on, Pete. I'm enjoying this. It's like old times."

He slipped out after her and gently closed the door. Then, with a warning hand on her arm, they stood in the porch listening. Without the moon it seemed at first to be very dark, but as their eyes became accustomed to the night, thousands of stars appeared like magic in the sky above the larch wood.

Peter put her mouth close to his ear.

"Were the men talking as they came past with the truck?"

"No. I believe they've been ordered to keep quiet when they pass here and Ingles. They looked like ghosts. There wasn't a sound and I still don't know what wakened me. Might have been Mackie. Come on. We've got to risk it and run, else we may never catch them."

Their rubber boots crunched on the frozen snow and at a sign from David they climbed over the gate instead of unlatching it. Then they looked back at the house, and at the window of David's room something white moved.

"The twins," Peter whispered. "They're watching us," and she waved in return and followed David down the lane. She prided herself that she could run nearly as fast as he could, but she was very puffed when he slowed to a walk just before Ingles' farm.

"Listen," David gasped. "Can you hear anything?"

"Only my heart banging. It's like a sledge hammer... They must be down at the main road by now."

"We've come fast and they had to haul that truck. It looked heavy. Come on then, but when we're past Ingles we must keep a good look-out. Cold now?"

She shook her head. She felt marvellous. Warm as toast, excited, and happy but for one thing.

"David. Are you quite sure we ought not to have told your father - or Mr. Ingles? Or what about Tom?"

"Course I'm sure. We'll call them in later when we've found out something."

They trotted on again as quietly as they could. After Ingles the lane twisted and turned between high hedges so that David could use his torch without much risk of being seen. The snow was frozen so that it was difficult to see the new tracks of heavy boots and the trolley, but they occasionally picked up the marks of the now familiar rubber wheels.

"Easy now," David gasped, when they were within about two hundred yards of the main road. "Let's get our breath back, Peter. Aren't there some ricks in the field on the right? By the main road, I mean."

She nodded. "Good place to hide. There's a gate here, so let's get in the field in case any of them come back this way. They *must* be there, David. Surely they couldn't haul a loaded trolley any further than this?"

"I'm wondering whether they hide it somewhere and then pick up the trees later? But that's an idiotic idea really because they dare not move the trees in daylight."

"Only in a closed van. A moving van, f'rinstance. Or a tradesman's van. Something which wouldn't be noticed on the road... A good place to hide the trolley might be between these ricks we've just remembered... Go carefully, David. The gate is just here."

They climbed over it and no sooner were they behind the hedge when they heard the sound of a car engine from the direction of the main road.

"Quick," David whispered as he dragged her forward. "We must see it before it moves off."

The engine spluttered and died and Peter heard footsteps coming towards them down the lane. The hedge here was low, so she pulled David down beside her on the ground. The hurrying footsteps crunched on the frozen snow. A man running. There was not enough light for them to see through the branches of the hedge more than the shape of a pair of rubber boots padding past.

"Risk it now," David breathed as the engine started up again. "Stick close but be ready to take cover."

When they were only ten yards from the hedges at the road junction the engine revved up and they dodged behind the first of the three ricks.

"Stay here, Pete. I'm going to crawl up to the hedge."

She followed him of course, but they were too late to see more than the shadowy bulk of the lorry as it moved off down the road towards Plowden. Then Peter glanced through a gap in the hedge in the opposite direction towards where she had seen the Christmas tree in the ditch. She grabbed David's arm and pointed. There was just enough light for them both to see something moving silently away from them down the hill towards Onnybrook. They watched, fascinated, while the sound of the lorry died away in the distance.

"What was that?" Peter whispered.

David laughed. "I think that was the trolley being towed down the hill by a car without the engine running. There was no rear light and no noise, was there? Could you see whether it was loaded with trees? I don't believe it was. They must have unloaded on to the other lorry but I can't see why that should go back towards the Mynd?"

"They could get back to Craven Arms by turning to the left or to Bishop's Castle if they went on another mile. Once through Bishop's Castle they'd soon be in Wales, wouldn't they? I don't know whether that trolley was loaded or not, David. It was just a shape to me. Let's get on the road now and look round. I wonder why only one man went back down the lane and where he's going?"

They walked back to the gate feeling rather flat after all the excitement and then up the lane to where it joined the main road. On their right loomed the bulk of the three ricks and once again the night was quiet. They stood in the middle of the road and David flashed his torch on the snow.

"This is where they loaded up," he said. "There are bits of trees and frozen soil here. See?"

The clues were obvious enough, but before Peter could answer they heard the sound of another car coming fast towards them from the direction of Plowden.

"Run for the gate again," David said urgently. "They mustn't see us."

Although the car was not yet in sight its searching headlights glowed in the sky below the brow of the hill, and as Peter turned to follow David she slipped on the frozen snow and fell so heavily that for a moment she was stunned. Just as the car roared over the top of the hill David looked back and, in the glare of the lights, saw Peter, right in its path, struggling to get to her feet. As he turned and ran back to help her he heard the scream of the car's brakes and, in sudden fear, he imagined it skidding across the frozen surface out of control. He reached Peter and dragged her clear of the car which missed them by about six inches.

Then he realized that Peter was clutching him with both hands on the collar of his duffle coat and that her head was buried against his shoulder. She seemed to be crying and he was so astonished that he just stood still and said nothing. The car stopped about thirty yards away and a small, slight man in a heavy coat and soft felt hat hurried back towards them. He flashed a torch on them as the car reversed and followed him back.

"It's all right, Peter," David whispered. "They can't do anything to us."

She relaxed, let go of him and turned round. David heard her sniff and saw her brush a hand across her eyes as the beam of the stranger's torch rested on her face.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I slipped on the ice, but you were coming very fast, weren't you?"

The stranger switched off, as the car stopped beside them. It was a large, black car with an aerial on it and David caught his breath with relief as a policeman in uniform got out of the driving seat.

The man in the soft hat smiled grimly.

"We were coming fast, miss. This young man of yours saved your life and you nearly had us in the ditch. Who are you two and what are you doing out here at this time in the morning?"

David told him.

"The foresters asked us to help them and about an hour ago I saw the tree thieves hauling a rubber-wheeled trolley down the lane past Witchend. They must have worked quickly because by the time we got here - we hid behind one of those ricks - a lorry went off down the road you've just come along and we were just in time to see the trolley going, in the opposite direction, down the hill to Onnybrook. We couldn't see more than its back and it was too dark to see whether it was loaded. We think it was being towed down the hill by a car with the engine cut out."

"There's another thing," Peter broke in. "One of the thieves came running back along the lane towards Ingles when we were hiding behind the hedge."

"You say that the lorry went down the way we've come. Towards Plowden?"

"Of course. We saw it."

The policeman said something they couldn't hear and then the man in the hat spoke again.

"Listen carefully, you two, because this isn't the time for any fancy tales. We're the police and we want these tree thieves. Just think again and tell us which way that lorry went. It couldn't have gone down the road as you say because we should have met it. We didn't meet anything between Bishop's Castle and here and we wouldn't be likely to miss a lorry. That's what we're looking for."

"There's the road to Craven Arms," the police driver said suddenly. "These kids don't seem to be very sure of themselves about the time, but I suppose that chap could have got down to the cross roads before we came along. Shall I report to control?"

The man went back to his radio in the car as the detective nodded.

"Would there have been time for that lorry to get down to the Craven Arms road before we came along?" he persisted.

"Doubt it," David said stoutly. "You can believe us or not, but what I've told you is true. The lorry went that way, the trolley went towards Onnybrook, and one of the men ran up the lane. You can see where they loaded the lorry with trees just at the end of the lane... Now we're going. Good night."

The detective flashed his torch on them again and Peter put up a hand to shade her eyes.

"You're not very friendly when we're trying to help you. Turn that beastly light out and I'll tell you where I think that lorry might have gone... About a

mile down there towards Plowden where the woods come right down, an old railway line runs close to the road. There haven't been any rails there for years, but there are the remains of a little station and where the track used to run it's like a grassy road. I'm sure there's a lane through the woods there, and I think it would be an easy place for a lorry to hide while you went past... Anyway that's all we know."

Unexpectedly the detective smiled.

"Thanks for what you've told us. My name is Hamish and I'll come and see you at Witchend tomorrow. I'd like another talk with you. Get back to bed as soon as you can... Good morning."

The door slammed. The headlights went up again and the car moved forward while they stood in the middle of the road and watched the red rear lights disappear over the brow of the hill.

"He doesn't believe us," Peter gasped. "He's going down to Onnybrook after an empty trolley. I could be right about that old railway track, couldn't I, David?"

He shivered as the sound of the police car died away in the distance.

"You might be, Peter. We'd better hurry now and I hope the parents aren't waiting for us. If that detective is coming to-morrow I'll have to tell Dad everything. I'll try and get him on his own after breakfast. Things are moving, aren't they? You feel all right now? You're limping."

"I'm all right. Must have cut my knee when I slipped... Please don't fuss, David. I'll look at it when we get back but I want my bed now. I wonder what Tom will say when we tell him to-morrow?"

"He might say that one of us ought to have followed that chap up the lane. I wish I knew where he'd gone but we couldn't do everything."

"We've done enough I should think," she said as they trudged past Ingles. "You pulled me out of the way of the car, didn't you, David? I know you did."

"Don't say anything to anybody about that," he said gruffly. "Let's forget it."

"Yes, let's," she said. But she knew she never would.

10. The White Horse

Peter was almost asleep when she crept into the house with David between three and four o'clock. She remembered sitting down thankfully while he pulled off her boots and then padding up to her room, praying that the stairs would not creak. A little, almost friendly growl came from Mackie, on Mary's eiderdown, and then she slipped out of her clothes and tumbled into bed. It was not any wonder that she overslept, and when at last she woke Mrs. Morton was sitting on the edge of the bed smiling at her with a cup of tea in her hand.

"I think you've plenty to tell us, Peter," she said. "It's ten o'clock, and although David said he thought you ought to sleep on, Tom has now arrived with the milk and the news that the Ingles' telephone has been mended and that Jenny is coming over to-day. What have you and David been up to, darling?"

Peter sat up and took the cup thankfully.

"We've had a terrific adventure and we were going to tell you all about it at breakfast. Has David said anything yet?"

"No. He's even told his father that he must wait for you, so I thought I'd like to come and wake you myself. Are you all right really, Peter? You're getting a bit of a handful to us. We know very well that we can trust you and David not to do anything silly, but it does worry me sometimes not to know where you are and what you're doing."

Peter was horrified. Mrs. Morton didn't often speak like this and she realized now that she must know that they had been out in the night. She put her cup down on the chair, jumped out of bed and hugged her.

"I believe we've really hurt you. Please forgive us because I wouldn't do that for anything in the world. Of course I'm all right, and although I slipped in the road and bruised my knee I'd forgotten all about it. We did go out in the night and we've discovered something frightfully important, and I was

so tired when we got in that I just slept and slept. I feel fine now and I'll be down in five minutes... And please, please never worry about us when we go out like that. David is wonderful and he looks after me."

Mrs. Morton gave her a quizzical smile.

"I'm sure he does, my dear. You seem to look after each other very well. Drink your tea and come down as soon as you can."

She didn't say any more and although she smiled as she went out, Peter didn't feel very proud of herself. It was true that when she had gone out with David last night she had felt rather guilty, but she wouldn't have missed the adventure for anything. And while she was in the bathroom and looking at her bruised knee she did hope that David wouldn't mention their near escape from the police car. Certainly the grown-ups mustn't know anything about that.

When she came out on the landing again she heard a babbel of voices coming from below. The twins seemed to be protesting in unison as usual, but Mr. Morton's deep voice sounded good-humoured enough and Tom was laughing.

When she came down five minutes later the twins clapped, but Mr. Morton stopped that by sending Dickie into the scullery to fetch her breakfast. "Now, David," he smiled as Peter started on her porridge. "She's had her sleep out so you'd better confess what you were both doing last night. Tom's got some good news, but let's hear of your adventures first. Cheer up, Peter. We're pleased to see you. Enjoy your breakfast, my dear."

Peter gave him a grateful smile and David sat down next to her. He told them how he and Dickie had wakened in the night and of his sudden decision to follow the thieves and of everything that had happened after that, except Peter's fall and their scramble to safety as the great car rushed at them over the hill.

"So you see," he finished, "we really do know something definite now and the police know about us and that we're trying to help them. The detective's name is Hamish and he's coming here this morning to see us. Although we

told him about the lorry going down towards Plowden we don't think he believed us. As soon as we'd told him what we knew we hurried back, and I expect I'd have slept as late as Peter if Dickie hadn't made such a row... That's what's happened and we're really rather pleased with ourselves. The only other thing to do now is to make our plans for tonight. I'm sure the foresters are hoping that you and Mr. Ingles will volunteer, and we've promised to man the fire tower and that means we ought to get some sleep this afternoon."

"Perhaps none of that will be necessary now?" Mrs. Morton suggested. "The thieves may have been caught, or perhaps they'll give up now and allow us all to have a happy Christmas."

Peter suddenly put down her knife.

"David! Do you realize that we didn't ask that detective about Donald Gibbs? I expect that was the very same car he went off in, but of course it was too far away on the Portway for me to notice anything special about it. I wish I'd asked them why they whisked him off like that."

Mr. Morton got up and knocked the ashes from his pipe.

"I can't really blame you, David, but this gang might be dangerous. They're risking a lot and I doubt if they're the sort to take any interference from you and Peter - or Tom or Dickie and Mary either," he added hurriedly as he saw, out of the corner of his eye, the expression on the faces of the twins.

"The trouble about this adventure," Dickie burst out, "is that it doesn't get anywhere, and that's because Mary an' me aren't doing anything special in it."

"Acksherley," Mary added, with a sidelong glance at her mother, "Dickie an' me are having an utterly miserable holiday. We're not feeling so very well and some people are unkind to us."

"Selfish," Dickie said. "Thoughtless and selfish. Just not thinking about us an'-----"

"Thank you, twins," their father said. "We understand. You mean that we're all selfish... What I was going to say, David, was that so long as you and Peter and Tom keep out of the way of this gang, I don't see why you shouldn't help by watching from the tower one night, but let's see whether we get a message from the foresters or the police first. I'll go down and see Ingles presently."

Peter was feeling much happier now and smiled encouragingly at Tom who was obviously getting very impatient.

"Sorry we hadn't time to call you, Tom," she said. "We did think about you and talk about you too, but we didn't dare to wait any longer. What's your news? Something about Jenny?"

"First thing is that our telephone is mended. Uncle was telling us what he thought about the post office people at breakfast, and what he thought this morning was different from what he thought yesterday only more exciting, and then the bell rang. They'd mended it without telling us. Anyway, I answered it and it was Jenny. You could have knocked me down, but it was Jen and she's coming over here to-day."

Jenny Harman was a member of the Lone Pine Club and a special friend of Tom's. Her father kept the Post Office and General Store in the village of Barton Beach over by the Stiperstones. They were all very fond of redheaded Jenny, who had a step-mother with whom she did not get on very well.

"She talks so fast on the telephone and asks so many questions I can't keep up with her," Tom admitted, "but there's some chap in Barton coming in to Stretton by car to-day and he's promised to come through Plowden and Onnybrook and drop her at the end of the lane. Said she'd be along 'bout half-past eleven. Seems a good show, doesn't it?"

They agreed that it did, and then as Peter took her breakfast things out to Agnes in the scullery with a very special "thank you" they heard the engine of a car outside and a shout of greeting

Tom had left the Witchend gate open and their visitor was Alf Ingles who had driven up in his Land Rover.

"Morning all," he roared. "Morning, Mrs. Morton. Nice to see you up here again... Got some special news for you, Morton. Hardwick, the chief forester chap, has just rung up. Wants us both to go up to a meeting of volunteers. They're in real trouble, it seems. Donald Gibbs, his second-in-command, has disappeared and the police know nothing about him. I reckoned you'd come up with me this afternoon and meet them. We'll have to do something to help over this business... Pinching trees right under our noses and these forestry people going to pieces... I told Hardwick we'd get this matter settled for him by tonight... Never heard such nonsense."

He paused for breath and Peter said, "But the police *must* know where Donald is. He went off in one of their cars. I saw him."

"No you didn't," David said suddenly. "Sorry, Pete, but you told me you weren't sure. You said you thought it was a police car, but you didn't actually see any policemen, did you?"

She sat down suddenly as they all stared at her.

"No, I didn't. That's true enough. You mean I just thought it was the police because it was black and had an aerial and because we *expected* it to be a police car."

"That's it. You said you were surprised that Donald went off without saying anything to you. Perhaps he couldn't help it, Pete? P'raps he was tricked, into the car."

"But why should anybody want to take him off like that?" Peter puzzled. "I can't understand it, can you, Mr. Morton?"

"I'm not so sure. I don't like the look of this. I don't want any of you youngsters to go too far from here today. Thanks for telling us about this, Ingles, and of course I'll come up with you. If you're going down to the village now to get some volunteers I'll come along too. I'd like to have a talk, anyway."

Mr. Ingles nodded and suddenly pounced on Mary and whirled her up to the ceiling.

"Come down and see your Aunt Betty soon," he roared. "They're always welcome at the farm, Mrs. Morton. Always welcome, and if any time you want a bit o' peace and quiet, send these twins down to us. They liven us up proper."

"I'll say they do," Tom agreed fervently. "Too much life sometimes. Who's coming along with me to meet Jenny?"

Peter and David said at once that they would but the twins were silent. Mr. Morton and the farmer went out together, and then Mrs. Morton and Agnes went up to do the beds. As soon as the grown-ups had gone Dickie and Mary stood in front of the door.

"Now listen to us," Mary said. "Just you listen, and don't interrupt. You know jolly well that we all belong to our Secret Lone Pine Club. Now we'll tell you what we think you big ones are doing. You're not taking any notice of us. We followed Primrose and found the secret road up to the forest, and now you're planning to help the forester men and climb up towers and you never think of us at all..."

She paused for breath and Dickie took over.

"That's right and you know it is. And last night when David asked us not to make a fuss and to keep guard when he went off with Peter, that's just what we did. And does anybody say 'Thank you, twins'. No, they don't. You're all just selfish. Here we are at Witchend and we haven't even had a meeting of the Club to decide what we're going to do an' Mary an' me are jolly well FED UP... Now Jenny is coming and we like her very much because she likes secret things, and we say that we ought to go up to our camp now and have a proper meeting so that we can have a proper adventure without leaving us behind every time... And if you jolly well don't do this we're going to do something you don't all like... See? You're the Captain, David. Are we going to have a proper meeting or not? That's all we ask 'cos we're FED UP."

The others looked at each other in silence. Then Tom, never very sympathetic to the twins, opened his mouth to speak and then saw Dickie brush away a tear with his hand. Peter noticed too and said quickly:

"Of course we want you in our adventure, twins. It's just that you haven't been able to do all the things that we've done. Let's have a Club meeting just as soon as Jenny comes, and if that detective turns up he'll have to wait until we come down from the camp. We'll keep a look-out from the tree. You agree, David?"

"All right. Let's do that. We haven't meant to leave you out of everything, Dickie. It's just the way things happened and you've been jolly useful to the Club ever since we came up here. And thanks again for being so sensible last night. Here's what I suggest. You two go and ask Agnes for some potatoes and food and go straight up to the camp and start a fire. We'll meet Jenny and bring her along to the camp. What do you think, Tom?"

As Tom was sure that Jenny would almost certainly enjoy a meeting of the Club he just nodded and said, "O.K. then. Let's go and meet Jen and get a bit of peace."

So, half an hour after Peter, David and Tom had gone off to meet Jenny, the twins and Macbeth left Witchend and made their way up the side of the larch wood towards the Lone Pine camp.

The sky was dull and although it was not snowing, a strong, cold wind was now blowing from the north. Dickie was carrying his knapsack full of food and stopped once or twice on the steep climb to cough.

"It's not fair," he gasped, scarlet in the face. "It's jolly well not fair. I do this more often than you do."

"Never mind about our cough, Dickie. Have you noticed Mackie? He's excited and sniffing about all over the place. Come here, Mackie. Tell Mother what's worrying you."

The little dog ran back to her side and looked at her with his head on one side and one paw raised. He looked as if he longed to tell them what he

suspected. All he could do was to whine and wag his tail and then dart ahead up the steep path.

Dickie dumped the knapsack on the ground and sat on it.

"Selfish they are," he gasped. "It's what we said and it's true. We're the smallest an' they just leave us to carry everything... Mackie can smell that somebody has been here. Somebody strange, I mean. A spy, Mary. A spy of the thieves. A spy who's found our camp and sits there like a spider in its web, if you know what I mean, watching us all in Witchend. S'pose he's got a space gun or something pointing at our house all the time?"

"Don't be silly, twin. You know he couldn't have a space gun... All the same," she added quietly, "don't let's make a noise when we get near."

Slowly they toiled up the steep path. Mackie knew where they were going and disappeared down the tunnel through the gorse which was an uncomfortable short cut to the camp.

"If there's anybody there now he'll bark his squeaky, excited bark," Mary whispered. "We'll soon know."

But there was no warning bark and soon Mackie was back again but still wildly excited. When they came down into the clearing round the sentinel pine tree they saw why. Somebody had been in the camp. There was an empty cigarette packet on the ground and some cigarette ends too. The rope to help them up the tree was hanging loose and not coiled round the trunk, and where a little snow had drifted there were footmarks and other disturbances.

"I hate this," Dickie said suddenly. "This place is ours and it's private. It's the most important and secret place we've ever had and now some spy has made it dirty."

Mary wasn't so upset.

"We can't do anything about it, Dickie, except to keep a very special look-out. The others will soon be here, so let's get the fire going. We can show

them all these clues when they come. You start the fire while I go up the tree and see if I can see them coming up the lane."

Dickie emptied his pockets of dry larch cones and got the fire going while Mary was in the tree. Mackie sniffed at the empty cigarette packet and growled his displeasure. He seemed to be pleased with himself.

"I can't see them," Mary called. "I expect they're coming up through the wood. Let's go back and pick up some more sticks and cones and then I expect we'll meet them. Empty the rations on the ground and bring the rucksack."

So after a final look down to Witchend which showed no sign of life but for a streak of blue smoke above the chimney, they went back to the wood. It wasn't long before they heard Tom's peewit whistle, so Mary - who couldn't whistle - put her hand to her mouth and called a reply.

"Come on, Dickie. Let's run and meet them. Jenny will be there... Call the signal again so that we know which way to go, though I should think they can hear us in Onnybrook."

There was a rough track through the larch wood from Ingles which was rather difficult to find, but by exchanging calls they soon met and Jenny ran forward to meet them.

Jenny Harman was small for fifteen. She was red-headed, freckled and snub-nosed, and to-day she was wearing a belted blue raincoat, a thick woolly scarf and a bright green beret.

"Oh, hullo twins. Isn't this absolutely wonderful? I never thought it could happen. Never. Only about two nights ago I had a dream. I always have dreams but this was most puzzling 'cos I was eating a steak and kidney pudding by myself in Buckingham Palace... And you needn't laugh, David. It's not funny. I'm just telling them about my dream. Well, I looked it up in a dream book I borrowed from the shop. I'll have to buy it soon 'cos I use it a lot and it's getting a bit grubby 'cos sometimes I take it to bed with me. What was I saying?"

"Steak and kidney pud in the palace," Tom said. "Jolly good. Wish I could dream like that. What are you trying to tell us, Jenny?"

She flashed him a smile and then put an arm round the twins' shoulders.

"Don't let's take any notice of him. Anyway I looked up Buckingham Palace but it wasn't in the dream book and I s'pose that's because not many people dream about it. Only the Queen perhaps? Anyway, steak and kidney was there, and what do you think it means?"

"Indigestion," Tom said rudely, and Dickie said, "What do you mean - what does it mean? I can't think why we're talking about steak pud."

Jenny sighed and turned to Peter.

"You know what I mean, don't you? What you dream about means something. Steak and kidney pudding being eaten in a dream means a journey over the sea and here I am to-day. A terrific surprise and I can't tell you how wonderful it is for poor little lonely me to see you all like this."

"But you didn't come over the sea, did you, Jen?" David laughed.

"Of course I didn't, but that doesn't matter. I had a dream about a journey and here I am. Yesterday Mr. Jenks from the garage told me he'd got to come in to Stretton and would I like a lift. And here I am and here you are, and it's just about the most wonderful thing that's ever happened to me just before Christmas, and I just rang Tom up and he told me about you all because nobody ever writes to me... Now let's go to our camp," she finished triumphantly.

"There's been a spy in it," Dickie said, and then added proudly, "P'raps we're observed."

"We mean it, David," Mary said when she saw the expression on her brother's face. "It's true. There are clues and Mackie knew a stranger had been there too. Come and see."

When they all reached the camp, the fire was burning up well and, as usual, potatoes were thrust into the embers. Jenny had been told most of the story already, but seemed to be much more interested in what they had all been doing and why they hadn't all written to her once a week, than in Christmas tree thieves.

But somehow this was not a good day for the twins. Although they had been the first to discover that the camp had been visited, and although they had carried up the food and started the fire, the others did not take much notice of them. Jenny became more and more interested when Peter told her about the disappearance of Donald Gibbs and how it now seemed that she had misjudged him. Then David and Tom discussed what they would take with them up the fire tower if they were asked to go. Time and again the twins tried to gain the attention of the others who were so absorbed in themselves that not even Peter, who was always their champion, could be persuaded to include them in any of their plans.

"Will you listen to us," Dickie yelled when Tom was describing the view from the top of the fire tower. "David told us once about that stupid view. This isn't a proper meeting of the Club 'cos you're not letting us be in it. Somebody ought to be in the tree keeping a look-out. How do we know we're not being spied on? We're not even trying to find out about the man who's been here. *None of you seem to care!*"

"But, twins, we *do* care," Jenny said. "Of course we do. But don't you see that you know far, far more about all this than I do. I'm just utterly *ignorant* of all your adventures. I'm sure we all know you've been *wonderful*. You always find out things for us. We couldn't do without you, could we, David?"

"You try to," Mary said quickly. "That's just it. Now you're all so busy telling each other things that you've forgotten to post a sentry, and don't you jolly well ask us to go now because we're not going up the tree again. We lugged all your food up here and we found sticks and cones and lit the fire and now you jolly well think that-----"

"You're not often kept out of things," David interrupted. "So stop making a fuss. If you're fed up why don't you go and get your sledges and have a

game."

Dickie went scarlet with rage.

"Come on, Mary. We'll show them sledges. Leave 'em alone and they can clear up for a change and just go on telling each other how clever they are. We know they're not, but they like being told they are."

"We brought some paper chains," Mary said coldly. "They're at the bottom of the rucksack which please return." She drew herself up to her full height and stood beside her twin. "It was our intention to decorate this camp for Christmas. We're sorry we're not welcome. We wish you a very pleasant afternoon."

"*Good* afternoon," Dickie went on. "Come with us, Mackie."

And so they made their dignified exit. They didn't even look round when they heard Tom say, "Little idiots. Let 'em go."

"Don't take any notice, Dickie," Mary puffed as they climbed the steep slope out of the camp. "He's always like that about us. It's just that he pretends to be grown up. But Peter is different. At least, she always used to be. I thought she'd be more on our side."

"Didn't you hear her say that she wants to go up that fire tower with Tom and David? That's all she's thinking about now and so is Jenny. She said that she wanted to go too, if Tom was going, didn't she?"

"Oh yes! Said she was going to ask Mrs. Ingles if she would telephone her father to ask if she could stay overnight. I s'pose she wouldn't say that she was going to spend it up that tower."

"Even if we wanted to go up there to-night, there's not going to be much room," Dickie laughed. "What shall we do now, twin? I want to show them that they can't do without us."

By now they were half-way through the wood on the track which led to Ingles. Mackie was scampering ahead as usual but came back to Mary when

she called and leaned against a tree.

"What could we do, twin? Let's go where none of them have been and see whether we can find a clue. There must be clues... Let's go down to the road where Peter found the Christmas tree in the ditch. Things happen on a road. We might see something or somebody. Let's do that."

There was nobody about at the farm so they hurried on down the lane and stopped at the road junction. This spot had always been important to them because it was the turning to Witchend and the highest part of the road from which they got their first view of the Mynd. They stood on the crest of the hill and looked back to where the long, smooth line of the mountain, patched with snow, stretched across the sky. It was still cold and grey, and the cold wind was shaking the powdery snow from the branches of the trees at the side of the road. Two crows flapped slowly up from the ricks behind which David and Peter hid last night. Traffic had worn tracks like black glass in the roadway but the snow was still thick on the verges.

Mary shivered. "Which way shall we go, twin? Down to Onnybrook or down to Plowden?" and before he could answer they heard something heavy grinding up the hill. They called Mackie and stood at the entrance to the lane. It was a lorry packed with milk churns and the driver waved cheerfully as he passed on his way, down to Onnybrook.

"No clue there," Dickie said. "We've seen him before. We like him. Nobody could be hidden in those milk cans... Mary. What do you think was hidden in that furniture van we rode in the night we arrived? The driver didn't want us to see inside, did he? And do you remember all the questions he asked about Witchend?"

"Of course. And he asked the way to the *White Horse* down by Plowden. That man was sinister, Dickie. Let's explore that way."

So they set off down the hill and quite forgot that they had really promised not to go far from Witchend without asking permission.

A few cars and lorries passed them in each direction but none were what Dickie called a clue, although he admitted that the drivers and passengers in

them might all be disguised members of the gang. They passed the road leading to Craven Arms and on their right now the steep slopes of the Long Mynd loomed above them. On the other side the thick woods came close up to the road.

About half a mile further on was the *White Horse*, a sinister-looking and shabby building with some ramshackle outhouses all below the level of the road. Now that they had arrived the twins looked at it without enthusiasm. They had passed the place before without really noticing it, and now it looked horrid with shut windows like blind eyes, and a grubby sign swinging and squeaking in the cold wind above the closed door. The only sign of life was a wisp of smoke from a chimney.

Even from the higher level of the road it was not possible to see behind the house, which was surprisingly large for such a remote situation. On its left was a large, rough space, obviously used as a parking place for lorries, and it looked as if there might be still more room behind the inn.

"If we ever walked right along the Mynd to the very end - this end I mean - and walked right over the top and walked straight on, we should come right down here, wouldn't we, Dickie?" Mary said. "I think this is a horrid place."

"All the same," her twin agreed, "I bet it's full of clues," and at that moment Mackie, sitting at their feet, growled a warning. Mary put her hand on his collar and then suddenly, from nearby, came the whine of a self-starter and the roar of an engine.

"There's a car coming from somewhere down there," Dickie said. "Let's spy on it."

They ran across to where a steep slope led down to the level of the inn, and were just in time to see an old car towing a long, box-like trailer on two wheels appear from behind the house.

"What a peculiar place to stay when you're towing a glider," Dickie said. "It will be jolly hard for him to turn it into the road. Keep a good look-out for cars and I'll policeman him out."

He stood in the middle of the road and signalled the driver forward. The slope was steep and the glider in the trailer must have been heavy, because even in lowest gear the car roared as it strained up the gradient.

"All clear. I can see both ways," Mary called, as Dickie waved the car ahead. The front wheels were on the road when they both recognized the driver. Dickie flashed a look of triumph at his sister and then shouted, "Hullo, Primrose! Do you remember us?"

Although she may not have heard Dickie above the noise of the engine, they both agreed later that she looked furious when she recognized them.

"Hullo," he shouted again. "How have you been getting on all this time? Why don't you come and see us at Witchend?"

Primrose Wentworth did not even lower the window to answer. As the end of the trailer swung into the road she raised a hand from the wheel and gestured fiercely to him to stand away. He was so surprised that he obeyed as she increased speed and drove away towards the Craven Arms turning.

"What did I tell you?" Dickie said quickly as Mary came up. "Didn't I say we'd find something? Why doesn't she want to speak to us? She looked *livid*, Mary. I was friendly, wasn't I? We helped her out and then she drove off like that in a temper."

Mary was looking very unhappy and worried.

"We've found out something again, Dickie. I remember now that she told Peter that first night that she wanted the *White Horse*... Dickie, listen. While you were trying to speak to her I was looking at the trailer. It's got doors at the back and they were locked with a sort of bar. But on the ledge at the bottom of the doors there was a lot of dry mud and a few bits of green... "

"Bits of green? What do you mean?"

"Bits of green leaf stuck in the mud. Bits of trees----- Dickie, I don't believe there was a glider in that trailer. I believe it's full of stolen Christmas trees. What shall we do?"

Dickie's heart banged with excitement.

"I'd like to explore this place. Could we just look in the yard behind the house before we go back and tell the others?"

Mary looked across at the dead face of the house and half stifled a scream.

"Come away, Dickie. There's a face watching us from a top window. I hate it. Don't look up."

He saw the sense of this and as they strolled off together. "What sort of face?" he whispered.

"I don't know. A horrible, quiet face just spying on us. Let's go back."

But Dickie, who hadn't seen anything, was bolder.

"While we're here, Mary, let's try and find out something more. If we hide in the woods the other side of the road we might see somebody come out. If we go back now and they say, all sort of stuck up, 'Who lives in that *White Horse* then?' I don't want to say we saw a face and ran away. Let's spy on them, Mary."

They were fifty yards back along the road now and opposite a cart track leading into the woods. Mackie liked the look of this and ran down it excitedly.

"Come on, Mary," Dickie pleaded. "It won't take long and we might find out something terrific... And look! Cars or lorries have been down here. See the ruts and tracks in the snow?"

Mary was usually the leader but to-day, for some reason she couldn't explain, she was frightened of the *White Horse* and of what they had discovered about Primrose. Perhaps because she had more perception than her twin she sensed something evil about the old inn.

"Let's see where this leads before we do any spying," Dickie suggested. "Somebody has been using it a lot."

The track twisted to the right and as soon as they were round the corner they stopped in surprise when they saw a half-ruined brick-built cottage about twenty yards ahead. It was not an ordinary cottage but Dickie realized what it was.

"This is the old railway Peter told us about. The line from Craven Arms to Bishop's Castle. That place is an old station. You can see the platform, Mary, and where the line used to run. It's like a sort of flat road now-----

And look. Lorries and cars have been turning here. Why, Mary? Let's go and look at the old station."

His voice sounded loud in the silence of the wood and Mary still felt nervous of something she didn't really understand. A fear of the unknown.

When they were nearer they saw that where the rails had once been laid in a single track was now a grassy lane, and here again the snow had been churned into mud by the wheels of cars. The windows of the tiny waiting room and booking office had been without glass for years, and as they stepped across the threshold they realized that they had fitted together another part of the puzzle. The old booking office was packed from floor to ceiling with Christmas trees.

"You were right, Dickie. We've done it again. We've found out things the others can't. First Primrose and now this... We must tell the others as quickly as we can."

Before she had finished speaking Macbeth barked and dashed down the platform. The twins turned to see two men watching them from a few yards away. The larger was smart and well-dressed and wearing a leather coat with a fleece-lined collar. He was smoking a pipe and without taking it from his mouth he said to the man at his side, "Take the boy."

The second man was very nasty. Small and wiry, with unshaven chin, and wearing a grubby high-necked sweater and shabby corduroy trousers. He stepped forward with Mackie snapping at his heels, grabbed Dickie by the collar and swung him off his feet.

"Well, well," the big man said without raising his voice. "Little babes in the wood, eh? I think we'd better tuck you up somewhere nice and warm for a few hours."

Dickie was too surprised and scared to shout, but Mary and Mackie rushed to the rescue. They had no chance against two determined men who each tucked a twin under an arm and in spite of their struggles strode through the wood, along the road and down the slope into the yard of the *White Horse*. And here Dickie, who was sobbing with rage, fear and pain, made a final despairing effort to escape. For the last twenty yards he had been still, trying to gain strength, and then suddenly he kicked out and luckily found his captor's knee-cap. With a grunt of pain the man loosened his hold and Dickie scrambled free. The big man with Mary under his arm turned and as Dickie flew at him he lifted him from the ground by his collar. He was very strong and very angry, and Dickie found himself being shaken so hard that his teeth chattered and he fought for breath. But the smaller man was even angrier. For a moment he forgot Dickie and concentrated on the little black fury who, with incredible courage, had been attacking him for ten minutes. As Mackie ran in again he lashed out with his boot, and this time the vicious kick caught the little dog's head and bowled him over. For a few seconds he lay still with blood trickling down his nose and then the man stepped forward and kicked him again in the ribs and on the head. Even then, Mackie got up, shook his head and limped a few steps towards the bully.

"Leave the dog alone," the big man roared. "Open the door and get these brats out of the way," and dragging the still struggling twins across the yard he pushed them into a dark, stone-flagged hall. The door slammed behind them.

And in the dusk in front of the inn a brave little dog stood alone. He lifted his poor, battered head and barked defiance as a drop of his blood fell and stained the snow. He barked again and the bark turned into rather a pathetic howl of misery.

Then the door of the inn opened and a man with a gun stepped out. Mackie barked again. The man raised his gun and the sound of the shot echoed back from the snow-covered slopes of the mountain.

11. The Twins Defiant

It took both their captors to force the fighting twins up a flight of uncarpeted stairs in the *White Horse* and into a shabby sitting-room. Then they were pushed on to a black, shiny sofa while the two men muttered together before the smaller went out. Then the man with the pipe locked the door, put the key in his pocket and stood in front of the fireplace. He looked hot and dishevelled.

The twins sat side by side, close together. Dickie's coat was torn and his lip swollen and bleeding. Mary felt bruised all over and her face was scratched. Without realizing it they were sobbing. They looked very small and defenceless.

Then they heard Macbeth bark - a bark which changed into a howl. Mary jumped up and ran to the window.

"Sit down if you don't want that dog hurt," the man snapped.

Mary obeyed and said to her twin:

"We're at the back of the house. He's not there. You saw what that man did to him, Dickie? He kicked him and kicked him again when he was on the ground."

Dickie gulped and nodded. Then Mackie barked again and the silence that followed was broken by the sound of a gun-shot. They looked at each other in horror and then Mary covered her face in her hands and did not even try to check her tears.

The man took his pipe out of his mouth and said quietly, "Nice little dog that, but too noisy."

Dickie jumped up and rushed at him, and when he was pushed back on the sofa he stood up again, and with one hand on his sister's bowed head he said in a choky sort of whisper, "You let that other man kick our dog and now if you've killed him we'll kill you. A little wounded dog, and never, never,

never will there be another like him, and you've done the most awful thing that could ever happen in our lives. Just because you're bigger than us you needn't think we're afraid. We're not, and you'd just better let us out quickly before our father and our friends come and find us. You'll be sorry then. You're the biggest bully we've ever seen and we know who you are. We saw that Primrose driving off with Christmas trees in a glider trailer. We know all about you.

"Now we'd like you to go away," Dickie went on. "You make us feel sick. It would be a good idea if you went a long way away jolly quickly. I wouldn't like to be you when our father finds you. You won't like it either. He'll be here soon - with the police. We told him where we were going. Down to the *White Horse* we said, didn't we, Mary?"

She was a little better now that her twin was so brave, but she still felt sick with horror at the thought of their darling Mackie.

"And you needn't think we're scared," she went on gallantly. "We just loathe you so utterly that you make us sick like Dickie said."

"P'raps you haven't noticed it," Dickie said quite brightly, "but this room smells. P'raps it's your pipe?" And then they both sat down on the sofa together and sniffed.

The man looked at them in grudging admiration. He didn't want to hurt them and would much prefer to let them go, but they had found the hiding place of the stolen trees. They also knew that Primrose was associated with them and had made a very shrewd guess as to what was really inside the glider trailer. He dare not let them go now for they knew too much.

"Now listen to me," he said with what he hoped was a winning smile. "I'm not going to do anything to you for being so saucy. I'm not going to hurt you-----"

"You like hurting little helpless dogs best, o' course," Mary put in. "You can't hurt us anymore. Only by staying here. We told you. You make us feel ill."

The man gulped and his face went very red. "You're just going to stay here for a little while. That's all. Keep quiet and you'll be no trouble and in the morning you can go home."

"Ha! Ha!" Dickie shouted. "We'll be back before then. Don't you worry. You'll be jolly sensible if you let us go now, but we don't s'pose you will."

"Stop showing off," the man said quietly. "Nobody knows you're here except Harry. Your parents wouldn't have allowed you to come here on your own and you can't fool me. Now listen carefully and answer carefully. How many will be sleeping at Witchend tonight and how many in the farm down the lane?"

This was easy to the twins, and although they were shaken by his shrewd guess about nobody knowing where they were, they knew they could soon fool him if he proposed to question them. And they didn't even have to look at each other to know what they intended to do.

Mary fluttered her eyelids and then looked down at her hands folded in her lap.

"Well *acksherley* of course there's quite a lot. There's Dickie an' me and our father and mother and Agnes. And David - he's our brother and very strong. Then there's our three big, strong uncles-----"

"Four, Mary. You've forgotten Uncle Percy."

"No I haven't, twin. It's Uncle Wilfred I forgot. That makes six uncles, so you can see that we do get a bit crowded. Did you want to come and stay with us? I don't think we should like that."

"You little liar," the man said.

"You've forgotten Grandpa," Dickie suggested. "Oh, but I forgot. He's staying at Ingles with his two grown-up sons who are policemen. P'raps you'd like to stay there?"

"Yes, Dickie, but I don't think this gentleman is very interested in policemen. Uncle Alf - that's Mr. Ingles - told me this morning that he likes to have a few policemen about at this time of year. He said they reminded him of Christmas, but I can't think why, can you?"

For a few wonderful moments both of them had forgotten Mackie. The man was beginning to lose his temper and this meant he might give something away. But he was too clever for that. He went very red again and then felt in his pocket for his wallet.

"Stop being funny," he said quietly. "You're wasting your time and I'm busy. I don't want to hurt you and I won't do so if you keep quiet and do as I tell you. You won't be kept here very long if you behave yourselves. And if you do behave yourselves I'm going to give you both a nice little present," and with this he produced two ten-shilling notes.

"Keep it," Dickie said rudely.

And, "Please go away," Mary added and, as she did so, there came a sharp knock on the door and an urgent whisper of, "Chief! Got some news, Chief."

The Chief glared at the twins and shouted, "Stay there. I'll come out," and locked the door behind him.

In a flash the children ran over and pressed their ears to the door. The two men were only on the landing and they could hear every word spoken.

"Charles and George have got another of 'em, Chief. No trouble at all, Charles says, and they've put him in the next room to the other. Wanted you to know right away."

"Good enough," came the Chief's quieter voice. "What have you done with the dog?"

The twins held their breath. Mary clutched her twin so fiercely that her nails scratched his wrist.

"Missed him," came the muttered answer. "Scared him proper, though. He went off up the road like a scalded cat."

"He's escaped!" Mary yelled with the tears streaming down her face. "He's safe, Dickie! They tried to kill him and he's escaped!"

Dickie beat a triumphant tattoo on the door with his fists.

"Bullies! Bullies!" he shouted. "Let us out before we smash the house down. LET US OUT!"

The Chief unlocked the door, took them each by the collar of their coats and flung them back on to the sofa.

"Stop that row," he snapped. "Shut up, unless you want to get hurt."

They stood up again and faced him. Their faces were stained with blood and dirt and tears. Without even speaking to each other they knew that now Mackie was safe there wasn't much else their captors could do to hurt them. Everything was different now.

Dickie spoke first.

"We heard what the bully said. He tried to kill Mackie after he'd kicked him and now Mackie has escaped. You know where he'll go, don't you?"

"We'll tell you," Mary went on. "Don't trouble to say anything. We'll tell you. Our brave little dog will go straight home to my father and to all our friends. You might just as well let us go now 'cos they'll be here soon."

"However much that brute hurt him he'll get there," Dickie said. "Don't you worry about *that*. An' we'll tell you something else. He'll bring them back here."

"And our father is *very* fond of Mackie," Mary took up the tale. "When he sees how he's been hurt there's going to be trouble for somebody, so you'd better let us go."

The man was certainly angry now. He stepped towards them menacingly and when he spoke his voice was rougher than before and much more threatening.

"I've spent enough time with you kids. You'll stay here until you're called for and *you'll keep quiet*. If you bother me again I'll have you locked up in a place you won't like as much as this. Do you hear me? *You won't like it*."

He stooped and put his face down close to them. His breath smelled of tobacco. He was hateful but they didn't flinch, and neither did they move until he had slammed and locked the door again behind him. Then they flopped down on the sofa and Mary sighed a quavering sigh.

"Do you think he'll really get back to Witchend, Dickie? He was very bad. He's wounded, Dickie."

"Of course he'll get back. He's strong, and think how worried he'll be about us and how mad with the man who kicked him. He'll come back with the others soon, but why don't we do something to make this beastly man really mad now? I don't care much what happens so long as we make it difficult for him. Why don't we smash the window and shout?"

"I looked. The window faces the back. You can't see much except part of the yard and the end of the mountain. If we were on the front of the house we could wait until a car was passing and then make a terrific row until somebody stopped and rescued us."

"Dad and David and the others will rescue us, Mary. You know they will. This man said we were to keep quiet and not be a nuisance, so I think we ought to be a nuisance. They can't really hurt us very much and it's dark now, so p'raps we could do a trick on them and escape. Let's try."

He picked up an old chair from the corner, held it in front of him and charged the window with a yell of triumph. The cold air rushed into the room as the splintering glass tinkled and fell into the yard. Then he went crazy and, pushing Mary behind him, he attacked the remains of the window with all his strength. The chair was not too heavy and he managed to smash some of the wooden frame, so that he could lean out.

"Mind the broken glass," Mary urged as she tried to look out too. "Don't cut yourself."

"HELP!" Dickie yelled. "Let us out! Rescue! Help! Fire! Police! SPECIALLY POLICE! "

A door below opened and a flood of yellow light spilled out across the yard. Two men, one of whom was the Chief, came out and looked up as Dickie flung down a piece of splintered wood.

"Oh, Dickie!" Mary whispered as soon as they had gone in again. "What have you done? They'll never let us go now. They'll do something terrible to us."

"I don't care. They won't dare hurt us. I want to get them all muddled up and mad. The others will rescue us, Mary. Mackie will show them the way."

"I'm sure they'll try and find us, twin," she said. "But s'pose these men take us somewhere else? P'raps it wasn't so clever to break the window? P'raps they'd have forgotten about us if we'd stayed here and been quiet. S'pose they separate us?"

Dickie moved away from the window. He did not sound quite so confident when he said, "We've got to fight, haven't we? We couldn't just stay here as prisoners and not do anything."

Before Mary could answer, the door opened and three rough men came in. They all looked angry and determined.

"Little fools," one of them said quietly, and the way in which he said this was more frightening than if he had shouted. "Are you coming quietly?"

"No," Dickie shouted. "No, we're not. You jolly well take us home before my father and the police come and rescue us. You'll be sorry if you don't."

"I s'pose you know that our dog has gone to fetch our father?" Mary added. "You'll get into awful trouble if you keep us here. *Please* let us go."

"Shut up," the first man said. "For the last time, are you coming quietly or have we got to carry you again?"

The fight didn't last long. It couldn't. There were three men against two children who were already bruised, tired, cold and hungry. They kicked and struggled as they were forced into a corner and then carried out of the room. They were carried down the stairs and out of the back door into the snow-covered yard and the man with Dickie cursed as the little boy wriggled and fought. The third man strode ahead with a torch and opened the door of an old shed at the end of a row of out-buildings.

"Chuck them in," he growled, and then as the twins were dropped on the floor he stood in the doorway and warned them, "Now maybe you'll wish you'd been quiet. If you shout we'll come back and gag you."

The door slammed and as they slowly got to their feet they heard the click of a key in a padlock.

"Are you all right, Mary?" Dickie sobbed. "Did they hurt you?"

"Of course they did. I tried to bite his filthy hand and he hit me and my head is buzzing round an' round an' I feel sick."

"So do I... I hurt my bully, though. I know I did. They're afraid of us, twin, but I'm sorry if it's all my fault. P'raps I shouldn't have smashed the window. Let's find out where we are."

He put his arm round his sister and to his astonishment she turned and buried her face in his coat in a fit of sobbing. For the first time in his short life, although he couldn't have put it into words, he realized that she was relying on him and that he must try to comfort her and give her courage; but it was difficult to know what to say.

"Let's explore first," he suggested. "Let's do it together, twin, like we always do. They can't leave us here for long, Mary. Honestly they can't. They only hurt us 'cos we fought them and I shall tell them all at home what a wonderful fight you made. I wouldn't have been able to do anything without you, Mary."

She lifted her head and wiped her eyes with her hand,

"That's right," she whispered. "We always do things together, don't we, twin? This is the biggest adventure we've ever had. We told them we'd go out and find one and we have."

Dickie smiled shakily in the darkness.

"Trouble is, twin, that we didn't tell them where we were going. I think they're going to be mad with us. Now let's find out what this place is."

"It's so dark, Dickie. I hate it dark like this and I'm cold. It wouldn't be so bad if Mackie was here. Do you think those men are outside listening to us?"

"Course not. I bet they've gone into the warm. Come with me, Mary, and then we shan't be afraid."

He took her hand and they began to explore their prison. The floor was of brick and the walls of rough boards. There were no windows, but through the cracks of the door and between some of the boards they could see glimpses of the stars. Inside it was so black that they could almost feel the darkness. Slowly, inch by inch, they felt their way round the walls until Dickie's foot touched something hard which rolled under his boot. He lost his balance and pitched forward, dragging Mary with him on to a pile of hard objects which shifted under his weight.

"It's all right, twin. They're logs. This place is where they store their wood... Let's go on till we come to the door again. I'll go first."

A few more feet and then again his foot touched something soft and yielding and he only just choked back a cry of fear.

"What is it?" Mary gasped.

Cautiously he stooped and then laughed with relief.

"Old sacks, I think. We'll wrap ourselves up in them presently... Can you see where the door is now? It's not quite as dark."

They found nothing else, and although for one brave moment Dickie wondered whether to try breaking the door open with one of the logs, he decided not to suggest it to Mary who was now shaking with cold. When they reached the door again Dickie put both arms round her and held her close.

"We could cover ourselves with the sacks, twin," he suggested. "Would that make you warmer? I'm cold too, but it's not so bad if we stay close together."

"Stay close," she whispered. "I'm frightened, Dickie I feel horrid. I wouldn't tell anybody but you, but I'm frightened of this place."

"Let's look at the stars again. It's not so bad if we can see something outside."

Then the silence was broken by the sound of a car coming fast along the road towards the inn. They saw the faint reflections of its headlights in the tiny strip of sky visible through a crack in the door, and then heard the scrunch of tyres on the loose stones as the car came down the slope to the yard in front of the house.

"Shall I shout now?" Dickie whispered. "P'raps it's Daddy and Mr. Ingles in the Land Rover."

"How could it be? Mackie can't *tell* them where we are. He can only show them. No. Don't shout, Dickie. I couldn't be brave again with these men."

At that moment they heard the back door open and the sound of footsteps. Then the gleam of a torch on the snow and Dickie, holding Mary close, and with his mouth against her ear breathed, "They're whispering something. Listen. Then if they open the door let's try and escape."

Mary shook her head in the darkness. "They'd catch us, twin. We can't get away while they're all here... Listen again."

They strained their ears but all they could hear was something which sounded like, "What if it is the police? The boss will deal with them. Trust

'im. He's fooled 'em afore and he'll do it again... Look out for these kids now. They'll make a dash for it, like as not."

They were shining the torch on to the padlock now, and while one of them fumbled with the key Dickie pulled Mary back so that when the door was flung open the beam stabbed through the darkness and picked out the two white-faced and shivering children huddled together on a pile of sacks.

"Listen, kids," the first whispered hoarsely. "You'll be O.K. if you don't make a row. Stay quiet there and you're safe, but if you so much as whisper we're going to tie these handkerchiefs over your mouths," and he thrust his face towards them so that they flinched away as the other man flashed his torch at them. Dickie thought hard. If the police were actually inside the inn they wouldn't hear them if they shouted, and if they came into the yard the two men would certainly gag them, so it didn't seem worth it. He realized now that they hadn't a chance of escape even if the door had been left unlocked. The only sounds were their own chattering teeth and the heavy breathing of the two men kneeling beside them.

"Cold in here, 'Arry," one of them whispered. "He ought to move these kids. It's not right. You two O.K.?"

If the speaker had switched on his torch he would have seen a look of utter disdain on Mary's woebegone little face. Dickie knew what she was feeling, so he didn't answer either.

"Sulky, eh?" the man Harry said. "You kids know too much. Don't bother to speak now and remember I've got this handkerchief ready for you."

So they stayed in silence for ten minutes. Mary was now so dazed with cold and exhaustion that she dozed against her twin's shoulder. He would have liked to do the same, but he knew that he dare not drop off. The men grumbled and fidgeted but he knew they would carry out their threat. Then they heard the car drive off and their two captors relaxed and stood up. After a little they heard a whistle from across the yard and went out, locking the door behind them again.

"I don't think they acksherley wanted to hurt us," Mary said as she got up off the sacks. "It was better we didn't fight that time, Dickie. We wouldn't have got away. I s'pose it really was the police in the car?"

Dickie realized that she was feeling better and was glad because he wasn't sure what to do next. He didn't want to say so but he was feeling desperately hungry and faint. They moved over to the door and then heard the engine of a much heavier car. Again it crunched down the incline, but this time it did not stop in front of the inn but came round into the yard at the back of the house. The engine was switched off and then they heard men's voices and hurrying footsteps.

They could see no gleam of headlights through the crack in the door and for what seemed a long time nobody came near them.

"Dickie, I b'lieve they're all going! They wouldn't leave us here alone, would they? Shall we shout?"

"I don't want them to think we're afraid. If they do go without us p'raps we could smash the door down and escape? S'pose they take us where they're going? Mackie couldn't find us, could he? We don't really want to go anywhere else."

"Not really, but if they leave us here we'll starve and freeze and I don't want to do that. I'm famished, twin. I've never been so hungry... Look out. Here comes somebody."

The door opened and they recognized the Chief in his leather coat with its big collar. His pipe was in his mouth and he spoke without raising his voice.

"Come out! Hurry."

By now the twins were huddled on the pile of sacks and Dickie's hand closed on his sister's wrist. She knew that he meant her not to speak.

"Come out. You're coming for a ride."

"We're cold and hungry," Mary said. "Please let us go."

"You'll get something to eat as soon as you've learned your lesson. Are you coming quietly or must Harry fetch you again? Harry doesn't seem to like you much."

Dickie stood up and took his sister's hand and with their heads held high they walked out into the starlit yard. In the shadows behind the inn was the bulk of a big van, and as they walked forward they realized that the Chief was on one side of them and Harry on the other. There was no escape.

The back of the van was half open and before they could protest they were lifted up and pushed in. Harry climbed in after them and they realized that there were several men already inside. They heard the Chief say, "You've got your orders and know what to do if there's trouble. Keep those kids quiet but don't be rough. They've had enough. Get up there as quick as you can, George."

From the driving seat came George's reply.

"That's all very well, guv'nor, but I don't reckon we can get up that road. The snow will be frozen solid. 'Tisn't worth the risk."

"That's just why you're going to go that way. It's the safest way in the end. Close up and be off."

Mary groped for Dickie's hand as the van started and Harry muttered, "Where are those blamed kids?"

"Don't you dare touch us," Dickie said bravely as he pulled Mary back against the side of the van. Then he fell against the leg of another man who pulled him, not unkindly, down beside him.

"They're here, Harry," he said. "Just lay off 'em for a bit, will you? You're not so clever with kids." And then to the twins, "And don't you make no fuss either. Do as we say and I'll keep an eye on you," and they believed him.

The men must have had orders to keep quiet for they spoke only in whispers and the children could not make much sense of what they said.

Mary flopped against Dickie and slept and he was so sleepy too that he hardly realized what was happening. After about half an hour they turned on to a very rough road and the driver, George, spoke over his shoulder.

"If I says get out, then get out quick, I told 'im we'd never get up here and what with the snow and all you'll be a lucky lot if we do."

"Not so much talk, George," Harry said from the back of the van. "Just get on with it."

George got the engine into bottom gear and slowly, very slowly, and sometimes with slithering wheels the huge van crawled up a long hill. Twice they faltered on sharp corners and the third time they stuck. Mary woke with a start to hear the driving wheels beneath them whizzing round in the snow, and then George shouted to the men to get out. Harry slipped the iron bar, opened the back and then snapped, "You kids stay there or you'll be in trouble. Keep still." Then, as the cursing men jumped out the twins glimpsed the star-spangled sky and the clouds rushing across the moon. A great wind was blowing too and when Mary murmured sleepily, "What's happening, twin? Where are we?" he was sure that his guess was right when he whispered, "Half-way up the Mynd, I think... Stay there. I'll look."

He crawled towards the half-closed doors at the end of the van and then realized that the others were at the back getting ready to push. At a shout from Harry the driver let in the clutch, and as the men strained and shoved the whizzing wheels slid over the frozen snow and then gripped. As the van crawled forward the men hauled themselves up over the tail-board and the doors were closed again. For ten more minutes they ground up the hill, slipping, swaying, and lurching while the men muttered and grumbled.

Mary slept again but Dickie was curious to know where they were going, and plucked up courage to ask the man who had befriended them earlier.

"That's something you won't know, son. Make up your mind to that, but keep quiet and you'll both be O.K. My name is Charles."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Charles," Dickie said politely. "I'm not sure whether you're the person to tell, but we're very, very hungry and cold, and if we don't have something soon I think we'll be very, very sick."

George changed gear again as the lorry breasted the hill and Dickie thought to himself, We're up now, but I wish I knew where. Must be on the Portway... Soon the lorry was in top gear and they rumbled along quite fast. Then they left the road, bumped across some rough ground and stopped.

"We're going to cover your eyes, kids," Harry said grimly. "Don't fuss and you'll soon be in the warm," and they were so surprised at this sudden politeness that they submitted to being blindfolded. Then they were lifted out and although the wind was strong and cold they sniffed at it thankfully. Harry kept his hand on Dickie's shoulder, while Charles walked the other side of Mary and helped her when she stumbled against a stone.

"O.K., Harry," said a familiar voice. "Take off those disgusting handkerchiefs and come in and shut the door."

With a shuffle of feet the men crowded in as the twins blinked and looked round curiously. They were in a shabby, unfurnished room with discoloured wallpaper hanging in strips from the filthy walls. The window was boarded over and an oil lamp hung from a beam in the ceiling. At the far end, opposite the door, was an iron stove in which a fire was roaring.

The Chief was standing in front of the stove and when they stared at him defiantly he smiled grimly.

"You've given us plenty of trouble," he said. "But you're game enough. You can help Charles get something to eat. Make yourselves useful."

There were eight other men in the room and, except for Harry, none of them looked particularly unpleasant. They were all obviously nervous and excited as the Chief strode up and down the room.

Charles, tall, thin and sad-looking, who had befriended them in the van, beckoned them over into his corner.

"Take yer coats off," he muttered. "Find ten plates and mugs. Yer can't wash 'em. We lives rough up here. If one of yer can cut bread without cutting yer hands off 'ave a shot. The loaves are on the floor under those newspapers," and he began to peel bacon from a big chunk of cut rashers and throw them into an enormous frying-pan.

The sight and smell of all this food gave Dickie fresh heart, and when he thought Charles wasn't looking he pulled pieces of crust from the loaves and stuffed them into his mouth. Mary busied herself with an enamel teapot which was almost too heavy for her to carry. Soon the room was filled with the blue smoke of frying fat and frizzling bacon. Charles seemed to have only one fork for everything, but he managed without much fuss to serve bacon, eggs, bread, and sweet, black tea to them all. The twins had to share a plate and a mug, but with every mouthful they felt better. They were warm at last. Their toes and fingers tingled and they scalded their tongues on the steaming tea. When the Chief had finished his meal he got up and stood in front of the stove.

"None of you need worry about the police at the *White Horse*. I looked after them. They were only on routine stuff, and as you all kept out of the way there wasn't any real risk... Now listen. You're going out in a few minutes and this is our last raid. The police won't be up in the forest, and there aren't many foresters left as you know. They're trying to get volunteers to go out as guards, and if they do we've got the fire plan. Be rough if you've got to, but be *quick*. You know where to take the stuff tonight, but if the police get too close and enquiring, leave your trucks and scatter. You know where to go if that happens."

The twins, who were helping to clear up the dirty plates, heard all this but there was little they could do about it. Then the door opened again and a woman, dressed in leather coat and flying cap, breeches and long leather boots came in. When she took off her helmet they recognized Primrose Wentworth, who stared at them in amazement.

"So now we know," Mary said loudly. "Now we're sure that you're a liar and a traitress. We helped you when you came to our house and were hurt, and you were a traitress all the time," and she turned her back on her.

"That's it," Dickie said. "A dirty traitress," and he watched her solemnly as a blush spread over her face and neck. Then she turned to the chief.

"I'm ready, but I don't like it. Weather's breaking up. There's a lot of wind and cloud over the moon, but I'll do my best."

He put his hand on her shoulder.

"I know you will, my dear. This is your last trip. Good luck. I shall be in the car," and he nodded to the men and said, "Put her up and then get going."

Without another look at the twins Primrose led the way out and the men followed. Charles turned at the door and winked. When they had gone the Chief filled his pipe and looked at them almost genially.

"Silly kids you've been, but you'll be in no more trouble now. I'm going to put out the lamp and lock you in, but you can keep the fire going, and my advice to you is to settle down and get some rest. Someone will come for you in a few hours and take you home. It's no use shouting and you can't escape. Have a good sleep," and he turned down the lamp, went out and locked the door.

They looked at each other and then put their coats on the floor and lay down on them in front of the stove. Dimly they heard footsteps overhead followed by the subdued murmur of voices. They were both giving up the fight against waves of sleep when the silence outside was shattered by the roar of the launching winch.

Dickie woke first. The fire was still glowing in the stove and making little friendly noises, but something much more frightening was happening overhead. From the corner between the boarded-up window and the stove muffled thumps and scrapings were coming. Then a lump of plaster fell from the ceiling and another thump came from above.

He sat up and shook his sister.

"Wake up, Mary," he whispered. "Something is happening in the upstairs room. D'you remember that the man went up there after he'd locked the

door? I thought I heard him talking to somebody too. Did you?"

Mary yawned. "I think so. What day is it?"

"Idiot. We haven't been asleep long because the fire hasn't gone down. Listen."

The scrabbling noise came again followed by another fall of plaster and Dickie jumped up.

"There's somebody there, Mary," he gasped. "Prisoners! We've got to rescue them. Help me move some of these boxes and we'll try and light the lamp."

"I'm afraid of the lamp, Dickie. I saw some candles down by the bread in the corner. Let's light one of those from the stove. Are you sure about the prisoners?"

"Of course! Couldn't be anything else up there, could it?" As soon as a lighted candle was set up they dragged two more packing cases into the corner and as Dickie climbed on to the first the thumping noise started again.

"When I'm on the top of the second box I can reach the ceiling," he whispered. "Hold the candle high, twin, and then I'm going to pull more plaster down."

He was wildly excited now, and although the packing case on which he was standing wobbled he found that he could reach the ceiling without straining.

"There's a hole here already," he hissed to Mary. "I'm making it bigger."

Lumps of plaster crashed to the floor and then he tugged at the laths until they brought more down. Then, in a cloud of dust he reached up to his full height, felt the rotting floor-boards above and began to tear those apart until he had a hole about a foot square. Then, coughing and spluttering, and with torn finger-nails and arms nearly numb with his efforts, he signalled to Mary that he was coming down.

"Can't stick it any longer, Mary. You try. Put your coat on and your hood up and try and poke your head and the candle through the hole and see who's there."

Mary passed him the candle and ran for her coat as some more scrabbling noises came from above.

"Hold the box tight," she said as she clambered up. "I'll put the candle through the hole first."

As soon as she did so a loud series of thumps followed, but it took the two of them to make a hole in the ceiling large enough for Dickie to push Mary through and then pass her the lighted candle.

And so it was the Morton twins who rescued Donald Gibbs and one of his companions, and so did more than anyone else to bring justice to the gang of tree thieves.

With her twin clutching her legs as she was half-way through the hole and holding up the candle, Mary screamed when she saw a man lying on the floor with his wrists and ankles bound and a gag across his mouth. But she recognized him, and in her excitement hardly realized what she was saying.

"Don't you worry, Mr. Gibbs. You're rescued now. You're safe. Leave it to Dickie an' me. We'll cut you free. Just trust us."

Gibbs shook his head and rolled his eyes and drummed on the floor with his heels to show his appreciation.

"We'll get a knife," Mary chattered. "Dickie is here too. We're all prisoners together but we're not tied up. The others have gone, but we've found out lots." She crawled forward without noticing the shouted questions of her twin below and touched Gibbs' bruised hands. "Oh! You're so cold. We'll get you some tea, but don't you worry. I'll send Dickie up with a knife."

She slid back through the hole and told her excited brother all about it while she searched for Charles' old knife. It took nearly fifteen minutes to free Gibbs for although Dickie soon had the gag off the old knife was blunt.

"Bless you kids," Donald gasped through his bruised and swollen lips. "You must tell me how they got you, but we've got to get down to the forest and find the others. That woman warns the gang from her glider with walkie-talkie radio... There's another of our chaps tied up in the next room... "

As soon as he was free he stretched himself and chafed his arms and legs until the blood came back into them. Then he gave a sort of roar of excitement and before Dickie's astonished eyes he kicked down the door and smashed his way into an attic the other side of the landing where another man lay bound and gagged.

"So they got you, too, John," he roared as he freed him with the old knife. "Tell me how some other time, but we wouldn't be free now but for these two grand kids who were locked up downstairs. Have you got a headache too? Bad luck, because we've got a lot to do in a hurry. You're in Wildmoor Cottage, by the way."

John Green, the other forester, looked dazed and shaken, but Donald hauled him to his feet and they went downstairs to where Mary was pouring out mugs of tea. Donald picked her up and hugged her, and then the two men gulped scalding tea and munched chunks of bread while the twins tried to tell their story.

Ten minutes later they were outside. Donald found a car at the side of the cottage but there was no ignition key in it so he opened the bonnet and pulled out wires and removed the distributor.

"That won't be much use to anybody who comes back in a hurry," he said grimly. "You kids have got to stick it now because we're going straight back across the mountain. We've got to warn the others, and if we're too late we've got to try and catch the thieves. If you're too tired say so and we'll carry you on our backs. Come on."

The weather was changing. It was still cold and dry, but a great wind was roaring across the mountain, and although Donald and John held their hands the twins found it very difficult to hurry through the snow-covered heather.

They were perhaps a quarter of a mile from the trees when Gibbs, who was a few yards ahead with Mary dragging at his hand, suddenly stopped and pointed. "A fire!" he shouted. "Look! The forest is burning and this wind will help it... Come on, John," and the two men ran off with long strides across the snow.

"Wait for us," Dickie yelled. "Please wait for us. We can't keep up."

Then Mary, now so tired that she could not have run a step, looked up into the sky as if they might find help there.

"The glider, Dickie! There's the glider again." Over their heads the familiar red-winged glider whistled. It was losing height. As it passed over the boundary of the forest where the two men were running it rose a little, and then as the twins watched in fascinated horror it lurched and then seemed to crash into the tree tops.

12. The Traitor

Jenny stood up and watched the twins climb away from the Lone Pine camp.

"They're mad with us," she said. "Couldn't we have planned something so that they could have been with us? You're not fair to them, Tom."

Tom looked a little abashed. "They show off," he muttered. "David and Peter are used to them and I'm not. They'll be all right."

"So they will," David laughed. "They're wild because they can't share in anything we do to-night. What about you, Jenny? Sure you're going to stay?"

"I couldn't leave you all now, David. How could I? I've just got to be in this adventure to the bitter end. Let's go back to Ingles and telephone my dad."

So they packed up and while the boys stamped out the embers of the fire, Peter found the twins' paper chains at the bottom of their rucksack.

"Look what they brought, Jenny," she said. "We haven't been fair to them, you know. They have wonderful ideas, and they're jolly good at doing things too. I wish we hadn't let them go off like that. P'raps they'll be at the farm?"

But they weren't. Mrs. Ingles was in the kitchen and her husband had gone off with Mr. Morton to the forestry headquarters after collecting more volunteers from the village. When they told her they wanted Jenny to stay the night without explaining where she was likely to spend it, she agreed to ring up Barton Beach. Mr. Harman answered the telephone and after he had thanked Mrs. Ingles, Jenny had an excitable and incoherent conversation with him.

"That's all right then," David said when she had put down the receiver and before she could explain what they already knew. "Let's go back to

Witchend and see what's been happening there. I expect the twins will be back by now."

But they weren't there, either. Mrs. Morton and Agnes were knitting by the kitchen fire and were not at all pleased when David admitted that he didn't know where they were!

"I think it's too bad of you, David," his mother said. "You know how much I dislike you all getting mixed up in the foresters' troubles, and the twins were only allowed to go off this morning on the understanding that they would stay within reach of the house."

David flushed. His mother did not often speak to him like that and he was annoyed because he knew that she was right. Tom fidgeted and gave Agnes a sheepish grin which was not returned, while Peter, who was so fond of Mrs. Morton, was not far from tears. Jenny tried to save the situation by running across the room and going down on her knees by Mrs. Morton's chair.

"Please don't be so cross with us. You've hardly said a word to me, and I expect the twins are quite near really just having one of their games with us. You know how they make up adventures and they just got tired of waiting for us in our secret place while we were talking about this wonderful, wonderful adventure... It wasn't David's fault any more than ours really."

Mrs. Morton smiled and ruffled Jenny's red curls. "You're always welcome at Witchend, Jenny, but it was David's fault. He's responsible, and I think you'd all better go out and find them now."

Almost before she had finished speaking there came a knock on the door, which David opened. They had not heard the car come into the yard but he recognized the man standing in the porch. "Sorry to disturb you all," he said. "May I come in? You may remember that I promised to come and talk to you to-day."

David glanced across at his mother.

"This is Mr. Hamish, the detective. Peter and I met him last night, Mother. We told you about him... I'm sorry my father isn't here. He's up at the forestry headquarters with Mr. Ingles."

Hamish didn't look much like a detective, they thought. He was a little, bird-like man with quiet, questing eyes, but he missed nothing and never asked the same question twice. And he called Mrs. Morton "Madam," grinned at Tom and said that he'd heard about his uncle, and gave Jenny a smile that didn't mean anything much but made her catch her breath with excitement. Then he turned to Peter, who was praying that he wouldn't mention that he nearly ran over her last night.

"You're the girl who knows her way round here, aren't you? Please tell me all you know about this business, and most particularly what has happened to you and your friends, if you think it has anything to do with the thieves. Now, off you go, Miss."

Peter felt that she ought to stand up, but she just blushed and started by telling him her name. As she was sure now that the lorry driver who had given them a lift on the night of their arrival was a member of the gang, she began her story there, and remembered how curious this man had been about Witchend and that he had particularly asked for the *White Horse* by name. She told him about the finding of Primrose, and the detective made notes while the story unfolded. Then David and Tom told him how they had found Peter in the blizzard and then followed Burton down the hidden track thinking that he was one of the gang. Lastly, Jenny, who had been on edge with excitement, told him that they had found traces of a spy in their secret camp on the other side of the valley and that they believed he had been watching Witchend from there.

This reminded Mrs. Morton that the twins had not yet returned and she looked anxiously at the clock while Agnes lit the lamps. She had no chance to say anything, however, because Hamish flicked over the pages of his notebook and asked them a few more questions.

"That pub, the *White Horse*, now? Any of you know anything about the man who runs it? Name of Hodges, I believe. We thought him a bit simple."

"He's a thorough bad lot," Agnes said suddenly. "Always has been. He may be simple, but nobody knows how he can keep that place open. I've heard tell that many of the chaps who drive the milk lorries have stopped going there now."

Hamish thanked her, but before he could say any more Mr. Morton arrived.

"Glad to have a word with you, Hamish," he said as he pulled off his boots. "I can probably tell you something you don't know, as I've just come from Hardwick. There's no news of the missing Gibbs yet and now another of the foresters called John Green has disappeared. Ingles and I have roped in twelve chaps from Onnybrook to help guard the forest, and I've agreed to Burton's suggestion that three of these youngsters shall spend the night in the fire tower watching for anything suspicious when the moon comes up. There's a telephone, of course." He looked round for his slippers and added, "Where are the twins?"

Before his mother could speak, David told his father what had happened, "But they can't be far off, Dad. Some of us will go out and look for them. They've got Mackie too. I'm awfully sorry, but you know what they are. They're fooling around outside somewhere I'm sure, and hoping we're going to send out a search party."

"But it's almost dark now," his mother added. "They're very naughty to worry us like this."

Mr. Morton looked anxious and Peter was suddenly aware that he had good reason to be. She was scared herself and saw that David was too. But the detective was speaking again.

"You've all been very helpful, sir, and you'd better know what we're going to do to-night. We're not going to worry about the forest, but every possible way off the Long Mynd will be cordoned. No vehicle of any sort will be able to approach the mountain and nothing on wheels will get away. And don't you worry about those youngsters, madam. We're patrolling the roads now and I'll tell my men to keep a look-out for them."

As soon as the door closed behind him, Mr. Morton went over to his wife. "Don't fret, my dear. They can't be far away. Are you going now, David?"

"Count me in," Tom said quickly. "We'll follow their footsteps in the snow from the camp. Don't worry. We'll soon find them."

"I'll come too," Peter pleaded and then, in a moment's silence, they heard a horrid sort of thump against the door and a faint, whimpering cry. She had the door open before anyone could move or speak and her cry of horror echoed through the room.

"It's Mackie! Oh! The poor darling. Look at him." She lifted his battered little body in her arms and he tried to raise his head to lick her face. Mrs. Morton went very white and sat down suddenly as the others crowded round Peter.

"Let's look at him under the light," Mr. Morton said sensibly. "Hot water and disinfectant, Agnes. Spread some paper on the rug, David."

Two spots of red were burning in Peter's cheeks as she pushed through them towards the fire. She was so angry that her voice shook as she sat in Agnes' chair and held the little dog to her.

"This wasn't an accident. He's been deliberately struck with something heavy. Look, Mr. Morton! It's his poor, darling head. It's cut and swollen."

She moved her fingers tenderly over his shaggy black coat, now all matted with blood and mud, and he whined pathetically and then tried to wag his tail. Mr. Morton moved over to his wife's chair and put his arm round her shoulders.

"Nobody would hurt our two, my dear. Don't worry. Mackie has got himself into trouble and found his way home to us."

"He'd never leave them unless he was forced," Mrs. Morton whispered with her hand over her eyes. "If he could only speak to us... What shall we do?"

Mr. Morton beckoned to Tom.

"Run down to your uncle, Tom. Tell him about the twins and Mackie and ask him to bring you back in the Land Rover. We want him in on this. And get him to telephone the police and ask them to get in touch with Hamish. He's to be told that the twins haven't turned up yet but that some of us are going out to look for them. And they're to be told about the dog, too... Come back as soon as you can."

Tom was struggling into his boots before Mr. Morton finished speaking. "Stay with Peter," he said to Jenny and ran out into the snow. Then Agnes came back with a bowl of hot water and cotton wool and a bottle of disinfectant. Peter refused to put Mackie down so they covered her lap with old towels, and after they had cleaned his wounds Mr. Morton gave him some brandy in milk and he wagged his tail again. He was breathing badly and Peter feared that his ribs were broken, but he was undoubtedly stronger and she believed that he would live. A few minutes later they heard the Land Rover and Mr. Ingles' step outside, and Mackie actually growled. Peter looked up with tears in her eyes and saw that Jenny was not even trying to check hers. "He's so brave," she whispered.

There wasn't much that Mr. Ingles didn't know about animals. He nodded to the others and said, "Got through to the police. Don't you worry, Mrs. Morton. They'll soon be found. Now let's look at the dog. Nice work, Peter."

He whistled as he looked at the cuts and bruises and then very gently felt his body.

"This isn't a fall. He's been kicked, or hit with a stone. He'll be all right, I reckon. They're tough little chaps... Good boy, Mackie. Where are those two rascals, eh?"

Then, to their amazement, Mackie raised his head, wagged his tail and looked at the floor.

"Put him down, Peter. He must sleep warm and quiet. Got an old basket, Agnes?"

Peter lifted him down. He stood for a moment very unsteadily and then looked round at them all. Then he took a step towards Mrs. Morton who went down on her knees to him. Then he changed direction and took three steps towards the door and collapsed.

"He's trying to tell us where they are," she cried, and burst into tears.

Peter took the dog in her arms again and put him in the lid of an old cardboard box which Agnes had found. They fed him again with brandy and milk and tucked him up in an old blanket, and while Mr. Morton was telling them their plans he sighed and slept.

"Ingles and I are going off in the Land Rover to look for them. Tom and David can do as they suggested and see if they can follow the twins by their footsteps. You girls stay here, please, just in case they come back while we're away. We've got to go up to the forest soon, but we'll come back here first... Got a good torch, David?"

David nodded and went over to his mother.

"We'll find them, darling," he whispered and then, without a word to the girls, he beckoned to Tom and the boys went out together. The moon was not yet up and it was dark by the side of the larch wood as they climbed up towards the camp.

"They must have gone through the wood towards the farm," Tom reasoned. "We should have seen them while we were packing up if they'd come down this way."

They turned into the wood and found two clear prints in the snow under a tree.

"They waited here," David guessed. "I bet they were having a council of war."

The next prints were on the slope leading down to Ingles. "We know they didn't go into the farm," Tom said. "Aunt Betty was in all the afternoon."

"They couldn't go anywhere except along the lane, then," David reasoned. "They wouldn't have gone through the wood if they'd wanted to go straight back to Witchend or up to the forest. They didn't go into the farm, so they must have gone on to the main road where Peter and I were last night."

When they reached the main road they tried to imagine what the twins would have done.

"I know you reckon I'm hard on them sometimes, David," Tom said as he jammed his hands in his pockets and stared down the hill towards Onnybrook. "I s'pose I am really but I don't mean it. They're saucy - that's their trouble - and they make me mad."

"I know, Tom. Nobody knows better than I do how maddening they can be, but more than half of it is an act. They pretend to be babyish just because that act was successful years ago. Now that they go to different schools they're worse than ever in the holidays. They really do hate being parted, Tom, and I s'pose you know they think the world of you."

"Wouldn't blame them if they thought I was mud," Tom muttered. "I'm not going back to Witchend until I've got some news for your mother. Now what would they do if they came here?"

"They'd try and find something we've missed," David said. "They'll follow anything up and bluff their way out of most troubles... I don't think they'd go down to Onnybrook, Tom. They'd remember that Peter told Martin last night about the old Bishop's Castle railway and the *White Horse*. Let's go down that way. I've got a hunch about it."

They trotted most of the way and when they reached the inn they found a police car in the road and another in the yard. A constable flashed his torch on them, but when David asked for Mr. Hamish the man told him that he was in the house. The boys ran down and met the detective just coming out.

"Good," Hamish said when he recognized them. "We've news of your twins. We've put the man Hodges here through it again and he's admitted that about ten men have been staying here. He swears he doesn't know where they've gone and that they owe him for food and for a broken window in an

upstairs room. Says he believes they had two kids with them when they went. Anyway, we've searched the place and there's nobody hiding there now... I'll send you back in a car. Tell your parents that I think your twins discovered something about the gang and that they've had to take them with them... Tell them not to worry, David. These men are thieves. They don't want to hurt children."

A quarter of an hour later the boys were at Witchend again. Macbeth was sleeping and when they told Mrs. Morton about the police at the *White Horse* she said, "Of course that's what has happened. I was always sure that the twins had either been captured by the thieves or had an accident. Why didn't you all listen to me and keep out of this business?"

"It would have caught up with us, darling," Peter said. "It would really. Nobody will ever really hurt your twins and I'm sure they'll be found soon. Anyway I've got an idea. Mr. Morton and Mr. Ingles and the others have promised to guard the forest and we've promised to go up the fire tower. We can't all hunt in different places for the twins because we're fairly sure now that they're with the thieves. I suggest that Tom and Jenny ask Mr. Burton if they can do the watch on the fire tower, and if we get a chance David and I will go up on the mountain. I believe we might get a clue about the twins up there."

Then Mr. Morton and Mr. Ingles came back and had to be told the story again, and both agreed that the police would find the twins more easily than anyone else. Mr. Morton hated the idea of leaving his wife and Agnes alone and warned them to lock the door and not to open it to any strangers.

"I'd send Betty up here," Mr. Ingles shouted as they all packed into the Land Rover. "She'd be right glad to come, but I don't want the farm left either. We'll get this business settled to-night, and the best place for you kids will be up that tower."

They roared down to Onnybrook and picked up four more volunteers and then up Dark Hollow to the Forestry headquarters.

Mr. Hardwick told them that he was going to stay there for the present and that he wanted Mr. Morton with him as a reserve in case he was called out.

Burton was put in charge of the volunteers and it was left to him to tell them where they would be most use. Then he turned to the four youngest members of the party.

"It's no picnic at night in the fire tower," he said. "Mr. Burton will show you again how to plot any incident you see. We've got rugs, and food ready for the sentries up there so off you go... Good luck to you all. To-night will see the last of this nonsense."

The moon was coming up as they went out into the night. Michael Burton, who seemed to be very tense and nervous, was friendly enough as he led them through the trees.

"The fire tower will be the last job to-night," he said. "It's the furthest away, but I'll take you kids up. I didn't know we'd got to expect four, though. It will be a job to squeeze you in, but you'll keep each other company."

David explained about the twins and what the police thought had happened and Burton was very shocked.

"We're all mad about this," David went on. "We know that Tom and Jenny will manage the tower because Peter and I want to go on the mountain and have a look round."

"That's a crazy idea," Burton said angrily. "Much too dangerous, and I can't allow it. You might run straight into the gang. The four of you must go up the tower."

But David was quietly insistent and Peter backed him up. "We shan't run into trouble, Mr. Burton. I know the Mynd and we'll act as spies for you, too. Nobody will catch us, and Mr. Morton knows we're going and he'll tell Mr. Hardwick. If you think about it you'll realize how we feel about the twins. We want to do our share of rescuing them."

Tom and Jenny backed them up but Burton was very upset about their suggestion, and each time that he returned after posting sentries at strategic points about the rides near the nurseries, he tried again to persuade David

and Peter to change their minds. He was not successful and the latter said "Good-bye" at the entrance to the track which led to the watch tower.

The last pair of guards were left in this ride, Burton led Jenny and Tom along the track under the trees through the darkness. The north-western corner of the forest where the tower had been built was not only the highest, but the oldest section of the forest containing the most mature trees. As Burton unlocked the gate in the wire fence the wind was roaring through the tree tops and singing a menacing and mournful song through the steel-latticed framework of the tower. Tom's heart thumped uncomfortably and he felt the sweat on the palms of his hands as he looked up.

"I couldn't do this if you weren't here, Tom," Jenny whispered. "I shan't mind if you're behind me. You're so brave."

Tom knew only too well that this wasn't true, but she gave him confidence and David, before he had gone off with Peter, had whispered to him not to worry.

Burton was now in a great hurry and very nervy and excited.

"I s'pose you've never done this before, have you, girl?" he said to Jenny. "If those other two had come it would all have been much easier. Anyway, you've got to go through with it now, and I hope you're not going to make a fuss. Don't talk. Save your breath. Don't look down. Hold tight to each rung because it's windy, and don't use the hand-rail going up. Rest on each platform."

"Don't you worry about Jenny," Tom said stoutly. "She's not scared."

And the odd thing was that she might have been walking upstairs at home! Tom was often finding qualities in Jenny that surprised him. He was now so surprised by the way she skipped up the ladder after Burton that he forgot his own fears.

"Isn't that fun, Tom? It looks as if it's wobbling about in the wind. Does it, Mr. Burton?"

"It moves a bit, but you needn't notice it," Burton said shortly as Tom tried to repress a shudder. "Ready for the last lap?"

Tom was the last in the cabin and he hoped that Jenny couldn't see how pale he was. In the fitful moonlight he noticed that although she was breathless, she was flushed, excited and bright-eyed.

"Like being in an aeroplane, Tom. This is terrific. Look how far we can see."

Burton lifted the binoculars from their hook and passed them to Tom.

"The white strips are the snow-covered rides. When I go back you may see me cross them to check up on the sentries, but you've got to look out for a gang of men pulling trolleys - or anything else suspicious. I showed you how to work the map with the pointers. Just show Jenny so that I can be sure you know what to do, and then try the telephone."

Tom moved the wooden pointer over the map and showed Jenny how it worked and then lifted the telephone receiver. A man's voice answered at once:

"Forestry Commission, Long Mynd Headquarters."

"Fire tower testing the line, sir," Tom answered. "Two of us are up here now and Mr. Burton is just going."

"Let me speak to him, please," Mr. Hardwick said, and Tom passed over the receiver. Burton said "Yes" several times and then looked at his watch before ringing off.

"Keep yourselves warm and don't both sleep at the same time," he said. "Ring headquarters every hour and let them know you're still here. We'll relieve you as soon as we can... Good night. Don't miss anything and don't on any account try to come down by yourselves."

As soon as Tom had bolted the door behind him he sat on the box beside Jenny.

"This is a rum go, Jen. Bet you never thought yesterday that this was where you'd spend the night? Lucky your Ma doesn't realize where you are."

"Yes, it is," she agreed. "But oh, Tom. Don't you think it's romantic being up here above the world alone and together?"

He was just opening one of the flasks of hot soup and looked at her in disgust.

"Don't be soppy, Jen. There's nothing romantic about this. It's cold and it's getting darker so that we can't see much outside and whatever Burton says I'm sure that this place wobbles in the wind. I'm still wondering why we're up here because there isn't much to see, is there?"

Jenny had to agree but it was certainly exciting. Although the moon was up the rushing clouds were low and heavy and the forest lay dark and restless below them.

They sipped their soup and took it in turns to look through the glasses, but did not even see Burton going the round of his guards for it was now too dark to see the rides properly.

"There's no need to look behind us to the west," Tom explained. "There are no rides there and no nurseries of young trees to steal, and even if the gang are in there we should never see them with a searchlight. We've been here twenty minutes, Jenny, and it seems like an hour."

It may have been because Tom told her that nothing could be seen to the west that Jenny turned to look behind her where the trees rose up the hill in stiff ranks.

Then she screamed, grabbed Tom and swung him round, and they both stared as if they could not believe their eyes.

The forest was on fire.

About two hundred yards away they saw the glow of flames in the undergrowth. A sudden gust sent up a trail of sparks and then, like a

beautiful scarlet flower opening, the fire spread and the trees themselves began to burn. With a gasp of fear Tom turned to the map and swung the pointer towards the flames. Then he lifted the receiver and Hardwick answered immediately.

Tom hardly recognized his own voice.

"Fire tower, sir. Tom Ingles here. There's a fire..." and he gave the bearing.

"Fire, boy? Are you sure?"

"Yes, sir. The trees are well alight and the wind is terrific. You must believe us, sir."

"Very well. Good boy. I'm going to sound the fire alarm and you'd better climb down and help fight the flames. Those trees must be saved. Tell Burton if you can find him. The old trees come first. The fire must be put out."

Tom put the receiver back and wiped his face. His knees felt weak and now they had got to climb down without Burton's help he dared not show Jenny how scared he was. He wondered what was making a curious rushing and whistling noise, and then Jenny screamed again, clutched him, buried her face in his coat and then looked up and pointed. Tom felt his scalp tingle.

Away to the south-east, only just clearing the tree tops and rushing at them through the night sky like an enormous evil bird, was a glider with dark wings. In a split second in the moonlight he saw the pilot, who looked like a woman, struggling with the hood over the cockpit. The glider was out of control and rushing straight at them. He grabbed Jenny and flung her on the floor as a monstrous shadow darkened the cabin and with a horrible grinding and ripping noise the glider struck the tower. The floor of the cabin tilted as the whole structure swayed, and then with a sickening crash the wrecked glider fell into the tree tops.

After a long pause Tom found his voice again.

"Get up, Jenny. We're still alive. Soon as I've telephoned we must climb down and help that woman."

He lifted the receiver. There was no reply. He jiggled the receiver rest. He shouted. It was no use. The line was dead and probably cut by the wrecked glider.

"What shall we do, Tom? What shall we do?" Jenny cried. "The fire is worse and the wind is blowing it this way. It might catch the glider."

Tom had already realized what might happen as the wind swept the fire towards them and was struggling with the bolt on the door. He could still see, in his mind's eye - and thought he would never forget the face of the woman pilot fighting to escape as the glider crashed to destruction.

He pulled up at the door and the roar of the wind and the fire and the smell of smoke surged into the tiny cabin.

"I'll go first, Jenny. Use the handrail and hurry. We've got to get that woman out of the glider. Are you all right?"

He couldn't see her face properly, but to his surprise she pushed in front of him and clambered down to the top platform like a little monkey and then looked up at him with shining eyes.

"I'll go first, Tom. I don't mind heights."

How could she possibly have known that he did?

As they scrambled down the ladders they saw the red glow of the advancing fire and heard the shouting of men crashing through the trees from the opposite direction. As Tom jumped the last few feet to the ground he glanced to the right and thought he saw something move in the wreckage.

Jenny grabbed his arm as he landed.

"We must see if we can help her first, Tom. The men are running to put the fire out. I don't think any of them saw the glider."

Tom had never known Jenny so splendid, but he was scared of what they would find as he opened the gate and ran round to where the fuselage of the glider lay at an angle between the nearest trees and the fence. Then they heard a frantic voice crying, "Get me out of this. Help!"

"Wish we'd got a torch," Tom gasped. "Can't see her properly."

They scrambled over the wreckage and saw that the hood of the cockpit was open and that the pilot was slumped half over the side. Jenny, who was much lighter than Tom, stepped on a tangle of twisted wood and pulled herself up and put a hand on the woman's forehead. She was very cold and blood was trickling down her face as she moaned and muttered words which made no sense.

Jenny slipped down again.

"We can't get her out of this by ourselves, Tom. She's sort of wedged in and we're not strong enough. She's badly hurt and if we struggle with her the glider may slip again and we'll hurt her more than ever... What shall we do?"

"Will you stay with her, Jenny, while I go and fetch somebody? I'll get Mr. Burton or one of the men from the fire. If we hadn't left our flasks at the top of the tower we could give her a hot drink."

"I'll go back," Jenny said quickly. "I don't mind. I'm not scared. I can easily climb down with the haversack on my back... Go on, Tom. Go and find somebody to help."

"We're going to get help for you," Tom yelled up at the lolling figure, and as he ran down the track between the trees and looked back he saw that Jenny had already reached the first platform of the tower. As soon as he reached the ride he met three men carrying the birch brooms which are kept in every forest ready for a fire emergency. Behind them was Burton, who looked at him as if he was a ghost, and before Tom could speak the forester shouted, "Get back and help put the fire out! Nothing matters except saving those burning trees. Get back, boy!"

He was wildly excited and when the other men hesitated he turned and shouted at them and almost drove them into the forest. Tom tried to explain what had happened but Burton refused to listen and ran after the three volunteers. Tom was just deciding to follow them when the moon slipped from behind a cloud and he saw two more men running from the mountain down the ridge towards him. He was so breathless that he waited for them to come up and thought, as he did so, that if the thieves were in the nurseries now they would have a clear run as Burton's men were all concentrating on the fire.

The men were nearly on him now, so he stepped out of the shadows on to the moonlit snow.

"Hi, you!" the first man gasped. "Lend a hand with that fire... It's young Tom Ingles, isn't it? What's happening round here?"

It was Donald Gibbs. Dirty, blood-stained and dishevelled but undoubtedly the deputy chief forester. The other man was also a forester but Tom could not remember his name. He quickly told the story of the crashed glider and the woman pilot, and added that Burton and the other men were all trying to put out the fire.

Gibbs looked at his companion meaningfully and muttered, "Fair enough for Primrose Wentworth. Come on, young Tom. We'll get her out. We want to have a talk with her."

They hurried up the track to the watch tower while Tom told them what had been happening, and quite forgot to ask where they had come from. When they were within sight of the wreck it looked as if the volunteers were getting the fire under control, and as the sky was now clear of clouds they saw Jenny clambering down the wreckage and running to meet them. There was no time for Tom to tell her what had happened because she didn't give him a chance.

"I managed, Tom. I've given her a hot drink and she's better. She says her collar bone is broken. Have I done well, Tom?"

"I should think you have, Jen. Better than any of us. I couldn't have climbed up there again."

Gibbs and Green got Primrose out, carried her to the nearest tree and set her on the ground with her back to it. Although she was obviously in pain Gibbs did not seem very sympathetic.

"We're taking you back to headquarters in a minute," he said. "These kids will give you another drink if you want it. Don't trouble to argue. We know too much about you and we want to know some more, Miss Wentworth. We also want to see what else you were carrying in that glider," and he nodded to his companion, Green, who went back to the wreck.

Then Gibbs smiled at Tom and Jenny.

"Sorry, I forgot to tell you. Your twins are safe and rescued us. We met David and Peter at the top of the ride and they're bringing the twins down. You'll hear the full story soon... What have you found, John?"

Green held up a tangle of wires and something that looked like a black box.

"This is it, Donald," he called. "Walkie-talkie radio."

Gibbs looked down grimly at Primrose and then over at the fire.

"We'll have to get you to hospital somehow, but you're a nuisance. I ought to be helping with the fire."

Before anyone could answer there came from the forest the sound of the peewit's whistle. The moon sailed out from a cloud in time for them to see Peter and David, each with a twin on their back, come into the clearing. As soon as they saw the group by the wrecked glider the twins slid to the ground and rushed across to greet them. Jenny was horrified to see their dirty, blood-stained faces, but they were so excited they could hardly speak.

"Nice work, twins," Gibbs smiled. "Sorry we had to leave you, but I didn't know there'd be so many men about to help with the fire."

Dickie, standing by Tom, looked solemnly at the wrecked glider and then at Primrose who would not meet his eyes.

"Jen and I were in the tower when the glider hit it," Tom explained. "Been having a rough time, chum?"

The little boy put his hands in his pockets. It hurt him to speak through his broken lips, but he managed to say in a very gruff voice out of the side of his mouth:

"Purty tough, pard. Purty tough."

Then, "Help her up," Gibbs said, nodding towards Primrose, but before anyone could move Burton came running towards them from the direction of the fire. It was possible that he had never seen the glider come down, but at the sight of Primrose sitting against the trees he just goggled.

Then, "It's you, Donald. And Green. How did-----?"

"Never mind now, Michael. Tell you later. How's the fire? Tom says you've brought all the volunteers over. Do you want any help?"

"Of course," Burton stuttered. "Of course we do. I was coming to find somebody. P'raps you and John would go over and help them and I'll look after this lady and take her down to headquarters. She looks badly hurt. That's it. That would be best. Truth is I'm worn out. I must have a break. Somebody ought to have brought us up something to drink. That's it. I'll go down with this lady and you others go and fight the fire. That's the idea."

Gibbs looked at him curiously. He seemed to be going to pieces. They were all staring at him as the twins stepped forward and Mary said, "We're very sorry but we can't put a fire out to-night. Acksherley we've been utterly captured by brigands as that traitress sitting down there knows. We're too tired to be firemen."

Then Gibbs said, "Just a moment, Michael, please. None of us here are fit for fire-fighting, and anyway it looks under control now. How did it start anyway?"

Burton looked round wildly and then, pushing the twins to one side, he came up to Gibbs and shouted excitedly, "How should I know how the fire started? I can't be in every place at the same time, can I? I'm the one who's expected to do everything. How do I know, except that there are too many strangers in the forest these days and too many funny things going on... And where have you and Green been anyway, while we've been needing all the help we could get? I'm half dead on my feet. You two go and take a turn with the fire and I'll see to the woman and the kids. Too many of them about here anyway. Just like a kindergarten."

A long silence followed this outburst. Peter, who was watching the twins, then saw them glance at each other and take another step forward. Dickie grabbed Burton's jacket, looked round at them all and said:

"We'll tell you how the fire started. It was started with petrol... *You smell of petrol Mr. Burton.*"

"Yes, you do." Mary nodded. "You stink of it. I can smell you from here."

Burton wheeled on Primrose and they all heard him say:

"What have you been doing, you stupid fool? You're to blame for this."

Primrose, with one hand to her injured shoulder and her face white with pain, looked at him with an ugly sneer and then toppled forward in a faint.

Burton's face was transformed with hatred and fear. He glared round and then John Green grabbed his sleeve. He lashed out wildly and then Donald Gibbs stepped forward and hit him on the point of the chin.

Burton fell and lay still. Gibbs stooped, ran his hand over his jacket and then smelled his fingers. Then he turned to the twins.

"Nice work. I can't manage without you two, can I? Now you've found the traitor."

13. Witchend Again

There is not much more to tell. No sooner had Gibbs knocked out Burton than one of the volunteer fire-fighters came hurrying through the trees shouting that the fire was out. Gibbs introduced himself and said that he was now in charge and would be over to inspect the damage soon.

Then he ordered the Lone Piners straight back to headquarters. They were to tell Mr. Hardwick what had happened and ask him to come up the nearest ride in a truck after ordering an ambulance for Primrose and telling the police.

'Then get straight back to Witchend. My two young heroes ought to be in bed... Try and get a lift if you can, David. You've all had enough exercise to-day, and forget all these other troubles. We'll meet to-morrow and I'll explain everything... Good night and thank you all - specially the twins. They've got a tale to tell, I promise you.'

He stepped forward and solemnly shook hands with Dickie and Mary, but the latter reached up and kissed him and Donald looked rather pleased about it.

Then Burton sat up, fingered his chin and groaned and Peter, who had been looking after Primrose, said, "She's better now, Donald, but you must get her to hospital soon... "

Primrose leaned back against the tree and gave Peter a glance of gratitude while David said, "But what about the tree thieves? I suppose they've got away with another lot to-night while everybody has been fighting the fire."

"That was why we had the fire, David," Gibbs smiled. "It was vital to get everybody away from the nurseries so that the thieves could work without interruption. I'd no idea Burton was so bright. We thought you were rather a dull chap, didn't we, Michael? The others will be caught tonight though, I'm sure. Be off with you all now. We'll follow with these two soon, but you must get those kids into bed."

The Lone Piners were all too tired to talk much on the way back. David and Tom carried the twins for a time, but they were very glad to meet Mr. Hardwick coming up the ride in a forestry truck. He was a man of few words, but when he heard that Burton was a traitor who had started the forest fire; that the glider belonged to the thieves; that Gibbs and Green had been captured and kept in Wildmoor Cottage and been rescued by the twins he could only gasp in astonishment. At last he found words to say, "Your father is at headquarters, David, and so is Alf Ingles. Ask them to telephone the police and they'll send a car for both those crooks... All right, Peter, my dear. They'll take her to hospital... Good night and thank you all again."

They trudged on down the hill and after a while Dickie said, "Excuse us, David, but we'd like to know now whether our father is very, very angry with us for getting captured by brigands? We're too tired for anybody to be cross with us."

"He was angry and you've upset Mother and Agnes, but they're madder with me than with you, and when you've got over all this you'll both explain to me why you went off like that without telling us where you were going."

Mary, from Tom's back, replied, "If you were all as kind to us like darling Thomas is now we wouldn't have had to go. You just banished us by being so beastly and now you know you're sorry 'cos we managed everything by ourselves... I think we'd like it though if Peter could trot ahead now to headquarters and tell Daddy that we're rescued and p'raps he could telephone Aunt Betty at Ingles and she would run up the lane and tell Mummy and Agnes... And please to give our love to Mackie."

As they could now see the lights in the foresters' houses Peter agreed that this was a good idea and ran ahead with Jenny. Five minutes later when, with a twin on each hand, David strode into Mr. Hardwick's office, Mr. Morton did not speak until the twins ran forward and Dickie said, "We're sorry we worried you. We didn't mean to," and Mary added as she hugged her father, "We got mixed up on a terrific adventure. We've been kidnapped. Have you telephoned Mummy?"

Their father nodded and cleared his throat noisily, and then Mr. Ingles came in and looked very angry when he saw how dirty and tired and bruised they

were.

"Your dad can take you all home now on the truck right away. I'll look in presently if I may, Morton, and let you know what happened here. I got a message through to the police and they're on their way... Better give those kids a hot drink before they go."

But the twins wanted to get home so they all piled into the truck and set off down Dark Hollow. Mr. Morton sighed as he let in the clutch. It didn't seem as if he was going to get much sleep to-night. Ten minutes later he pulled up outside Witchend and the twins rushed across the snow and flung themselves at their mother who was standing in the porch to welcome them. If she was horrified by their appearance she didn't show it. When she had recovered her breath she said:

"Mackie's better, darlings, but don't disturb him. Off with those filthy clothes and into a hot bath and then, if you can stay awake, something hot to drink. Don't argue. Agnes is waiting for you with a scrubbing brush."

She shooed them into the house and gave the others a wonderful smile. "Thank you, David - and all of you. Come in and get warm and tell me all about it."

So they took off their coats and boots and crowded round the fire. In his hospital bed Mackie whimpered and shivered a little in his sleep, but Peter was sure that he was better. From upstairs came the sounds of rushing water, squealed protests and the doleful humming of "*Rock of Ages cleft for me*" which proved that Agnes was wasting no time with the twins.

"Talk to me while I'm serving the soup," Mrs. Morton said. "There's no need for you girls to move either. You look as if you'd had enough."

They tried to take it in turns to tell Mrs. Morton the whole story and had just sat down to supper when Mr. Ingles arrived.

"Can't stop long now," he shouted. "Just wanted to let you know that all's well. That young villain, Burton, has gone off in the police car with the woman and all the volunteers are going back to headquarters. The fire's out

and Gibbs says that's a blessing. Hardwick thinks many more young trees were stolen while that fire racket was working - clever idea that - but he's sure the police will get all the thieves to-night. I came down the old track just now and ran into two rubber-wheeled trolleys loaded with trees. The thieves must have changed their minds and run for it... Now where're those two rascals o' yours, Mrs. Morton? You should be proud of them by what I hear. Can't keep 'em out of trouble, can you?" and he slapped his knee and roared with laughter at a joke which none of them really appreciated.

"Thank you very much for all your help, Mr. Ingles," Mrs. Morton smiled. "It sounds as if the twins are in the bath and as soon as they're out of it they're going to bed, and then if they can stay awake we shall feed them."

"Good enough," Mr. Ingles shouted. "If it's all the same to you I'll just go up and say 'Good night'."

"It won't be all the same to Agnes," David whispered as the house shook with Mr. Ingles' ascent. "Agnes doesn't agree with too much praise for the twins."

Renewed hubbub from upstairs suggested that "Uncle Alf" was being welcomed in the bathroom. He didn't stay long and when he thundered downstairs again he was roaring with laughter and wiping soapsuds from his neck.

"Good night all," he shouted. "This has been what I call a good day, but I wish I'd been able to lay my hands on just one o' those thieving devils... Don't be too long before you bring Jenny along, Tom."

They tried to settle down to the meal again but within five minutes there was another knock on the door and this time the detective Hamish came in.

"Soup on the stove, Mr. Hamish," Mrs. Morton said. "Please help yourself," and to everybody's surprise he did, and sat down at table with them.

"We've got them all including the leader - a chap called Percival who we've wanted for several jobs for a long time. Picked him up in Ludlow when he was making a run for it, having decided to desert the rest of his gang. The

woman pilot who is a pretty tough bird is now in hospital and Burton is sulking in a cell at the police station. The forestry chaps are very upset about him and I can't say I blame them. He must have needed money badly and Percival knew it. This place is ideal, of course. Nobody about on the Long Mynd in winter, and while there was a moon the glider pilot could watch all the approaches to the mountain from a reasonable height and warn them by radio. Their luck lasted as long as the weather did. There'll not be much of a moon to-morrow. We found the hiding place of the trees in the ruined station - that railway track was a good idea of yours, miss."

Peter blushed and said to Mrs. Morton, "It must sound very confusing for you, darling, but we'll explain everything to-morrow when we're feeling brighter." Then to the detective, "How did they move the stolen trees from the old station and when?"

"We believe they used tradesmen's vans, removal vans, and often the trailer in which that woman's glider is towed round. We've just stopped that in Onnybrook. There were a lot of people involved in this business, but it was cleverly planned and we're glad to get it settled."

"We're glad, too," Peter smiled ruefully as she glanced at poor little Macbeth. "All the same, Mr. Hamish, there are still one or two things we'd like to know."

"Go ahead, young lady. I'll do my best."

"I'm still not sure what Primrose Wentworth was doing out in the wood when Agnes found her on the night we arrived."

"We'll have to guess until she tells us, but I think she'd been given the job of exploring the mountain on foot to see if she could find any little-used tracks which could be used by the thieves. She may, of course, have been up in her glider several times before you arrived. From the air it may be possible to see the position of the old sunken road which we now know was the route they found most suitable for their rubber-wheeled trucks, and that's what she was looking for."

"Of course," Peter agreed. "When she went off early the next morning she probably called first at the *White Horse* where the gang was assembling. Later, she came back and the twins saw her crawling past this house and followed her up the track to the nurseries... I see now that's why she was snooping. We were sure she really had twisted her ankle."

"May I have a turn now?" David laughed. "Why were they all so keen to get us out of this house? Why that stupid suggestion that Dad might let Witchend for winter sports?"

"I think that's clear enough," Hamish replied. "As soon as they had discovered the old track which passes so close to this house, they wanted to make sure that they would have as little interruption as possible. If they could have got you all out of the way they would have had a much clearer run down to the main road with much less risk of discovery."

"That's true," Tom agreed. "Ingles farm stands back quite a distance from the lane and I don't suppose any of us would have heard them in the night."

"I don't suppose you would," Hamish said. "They took big risks and they've been very clever. I meant to tell you, by the way, that they also used Wildmoor Cottage for storing stolen trees. We've found some there. They moved the trees from there, from the old station and from the *White Horse* as it suited them."

He stood up and gave Mrs. Morton a little bow.

"And I have to thank you, Madam, for the intelligent help given to us by you all and especially by these youngsters. I'm sorry those twins of yours got carried off, but I gather they gave quite a lot of trouble. I hope they're not much the worse for their adventure."

"Oh, but we are," came Mary's voice from the top of the stairs. "We're much, much worse, and it's very, very nice of you to enquire about us, Mr. Detective. Would you care to give us a medal?"

"I'll think about it," Hamish laughed. "Two medals, of course."

The twins were standing side by side in their pyjamas on the top stair with Agnes looming over them. They looked pink and shining, but Dickie's mouth was still swollen.

"Tell you all what," he said sleepily. "We're too utterly exhausted to talk much about it now, and anyway you're all making such a row that we don't suppose we'll ever be able to rest an' recover our strength... Anyway, we've thought of something jolly important we want for Christmas... Shall we tell you what it is?"

"All right, we will," came Mary's clear little voice. "We shall want a Christmas tree."

And from the hearth came the thud of Mackie's tail as saluted the two voices he loved best.